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IN TRINIDAD!**

by **L. L. FOREMAN**
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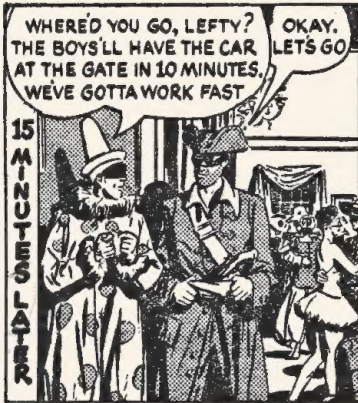
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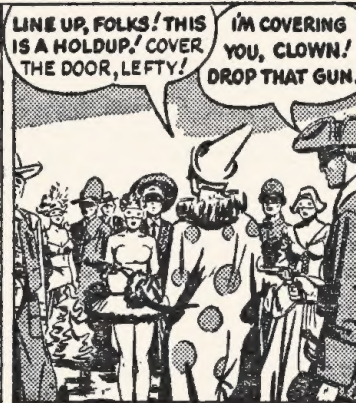
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Vol. 21, No. 1

CONTENTS

February, 1949

Two Smashing Full-Length Novels

TRIGGER-TROUBLE IN TRINIDAD! L. L. Foreman 10

It was a toss-up, Carr Kinkaid figured, between playing out the grim black aces and eights of a dead man's hand, or making tracks for the nearest lawdog's waiting noose!

ONE GUN AGAINST HELL'S ANGELS . . . Harry F. Olmsted 100

Rome Whitaker could gun-talk with the bloody butcher of the Carthage Mormons . . . if he augered his way past the frontier's deadliest killers—the red-handed Angels of Hell!

A Powerful Frontier Novelette

THE NIGHT THAT HELL FROZE Tom W. Blackburn 50

A thousand tons of ice would bury that fabulous golden fortune. And with it—unless his two hands could stop the roaring avalanche—Sam Grayson's crushed and bloodied bones!

Six Hard-Hitting Cattle Country Short Stories

PEACE IS A FIGHTING WORD! C. William Harrison 33

How could Dave Gordon protect the woman he loved, after he sold his manhood, his honor . . . and his guns?

RIVER TINHORN'S LAST HAND Robert L. Trimnell 41

The murdering tinhorn killed to steal a hangrope . . . then looped it around his neck!

FANGS OF THE WILDLING BUCCANEER . . H. Cruickshank 65

Against the man's deadly steel, Chag, the buccaneer mink, could bring only his fangs . . . and a savage fighting heart!

SPIT IN DEATH'S EYE! Tom Roan 73

When the red tides of war swept Powder River Range, Sam Rider was in a spot he'd picked himself—right between both sides!

BOOTS AND SADDLES Norman B. Wolfe 83

As the painted savage legion rode down on his doomed command, Captain Saber McDowell found that you couldn't fight Apaches with Gatling guns alone. You needed guts!

BULLET ANTE Robert J. Hogan 94

Even the sharpest cardslick, Steve Scott learned too late, might slip himself the boothill joker!

Two Ace-High Fact Features

SECOND-STRING HEROES Robbins and Waggener 6

POSSE TRAP L. C. Davis 8

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by **ROBBINS AND WAGGENER**



Joseph Bradley



1

Joseph Bradley, a small Montana rancher, was as mad as anyone when the cattlemen on the Upper Range discovered that over 500 prime cattle had disappeared from their respective herds between spring and fall. The rustling had been a neat job. There was neither trail nor clue to follow. Angry, yet helpless, the men gathered in the town of Big Hat to talk it over.

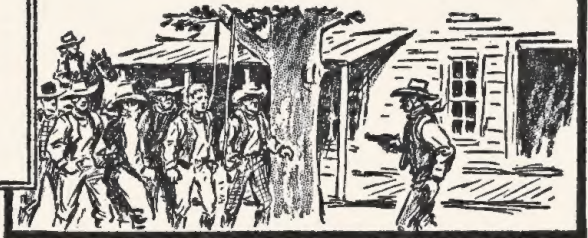


2

Just then a tumbleweed cowpoke came drifting through and entered into sympathetic conversation with the ranchers regarding their loss. "Seems to me," someone broke in, "you know a lot more about this rustlin' than you should, stranger!" And such is the distorted, unreasoning behavior of lynch-minded mobs that before anyone knew how it happened the stranger was being hustled toward the nearest cottonwood.

3

Bradley was not a particularly brave man, nor a champion of little men, but somehow he found himself holding off that mob at the point of his gun. "You know what this means, Joe," he was warned. He nodded steadily. "Execution without trial is not western justice," he answered. He was probably surprised to find that he knew so many big words. The stranger made his escape under Joe's sheltering gun.



4

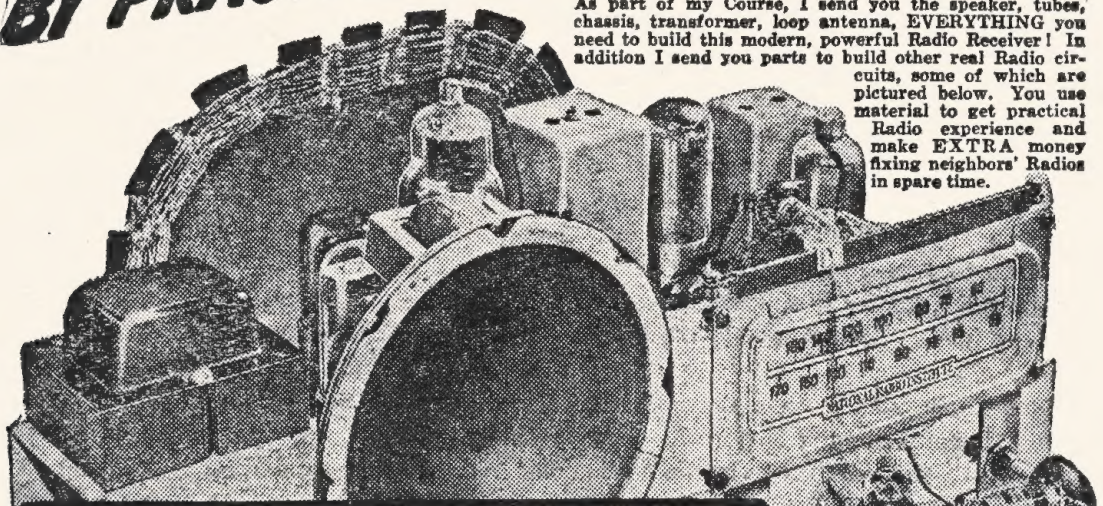
For a month Joe Bradley and his wife lived in fear of their lives. Twice they beat off mobs of enraged former friends and neighbors. Then, a notorious Little Rockies rustler named Biordan was caught down on the border and confessed to stealing the 500 head of cattle from the ranches of the Upper Range. Most of the stock was recovered, and Joe's neighbors apologized. Bradley died a few years later in a roundup accident and on his wooden marker, for many years after that fatal afternoon in 1872, one could read the brave words, "Execution without trial is not western justice."



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POSSE TRAP

By
L. C. DAVIS

HAD Marshal Cobb of Appleton City, Mo., been a Bible student he would have heeded the lesson taught by Gideon in his selection of an army and not permitted his posse of ten to stack arms while they prostrated themselves and drank greedily from the spring. As it was they were an easy prey to a trap laid by the Younger Brothers that sultry morning in the years following the Civil War.

Even so he should have remembered those old adages about a bird in the hand being worth two—or three—in the bush, and about counting the chicks before the old hen finishes her job. For Marshal Cobb was full of confidence that morning as he gathered his posse at Monegaw Springs. He rubbed his hands in glee.

"Hot ziggety!" he cackled. "We won't give a dam' about the heat when we get that reward offered by the Pinkertons for them Youngers. Will we, boys?"

The others winked and grinned crookedly as they swung into their saddles. Had they known how close their quarry was they would not have dismounted so casually at the spring a short time later, for the Youngers—Cole, Jim and John—had arrived previously and hidden in the brush around the water hole.

They drank noisily—so loudly that they failed to hear approaching footsteps, as the three "birds" catfooted from their hiding place in the bushes. They were unaware of their presence until one of the posse paused in his greedy lapping to allow the ripples to subside and reveal the grim face of one of the outlaws reflected in the pool.

"O. K., gents! Reach!"

The posse members flopped over in astonishment. Like small boys caught stealing watermelons, they struggled to their feet.

"Well, well!" Cole Younger gloated. "Good water, ain't it? Now that you bounty-huntin' polecats hev got yore belly-full, how about some hot coffee? Or hev you had yore breakfast yet?"

It was a crestfallen group that marched up the hill to the rambling three-story frame Menegaw Springs Hotel.

They clomped noisily into the hotel dining room. A negro servant looked up startled, and moaned at sight of the men.

Cole Younger waved his six-gun in the direction of the long table.

"Have a seat, gents," he invited. "How about some grub, Mose? These men are hungry. What'll it be, gents?"

The men *had* been hungry, but somehow they had lost their appetites. They only wanted coffee to settle their crawling stomachs. The outlaws, however, ate heartily and repeatedly called for more.

When Cole Younger had sopped the last bit of gravy from the dish and washed it down with two swallows of coffee, he lit a cigar and waved the men over toward the wall.

The posse members paled. So they were to be shot down like rats!

But the outlaw leader dispelled their fears. No, he was going to preach them a sermon. And he did. It was on the subject, "Love Thy Neighbor As Thyself." Reminding them that the Civil War was over, he said old friends and neighbors should live together in peace, forgetting old differences. And he paid for the meal, too—with tips!

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He met Boy Salso coming
down an abandoned wagon
trail.

TRIGGER-TROUBLE



He met Boy Salso coming down an abandoned wagon trail.



A Smashing Owlhoot Saga

By L. L. FOREMAN

CHAPTER ONE

Owlhoot Rendezvous

AS SOON as he ran into Boy Salso again, Carr Kincaid knew that Boy had changed, and not for the better. Boy didn't fit his name any more. He

fitted the reputation that had grown around him these last couple of years. He wore a belt knife along with two guns, his smiling face was scarred, and he was riding at the head of half a dozen swarthy jiggers who looked as lobo-tough as he did.

TRIGGER-TROUBLE

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IN TRINIDAD!

Well, it was often a short step, Carr Kincaid mused bleakly, from fighting for fun to gunning for profit. He had scuffed both part way over the route, himself.

They met coming down an abandoned wagon trail from the high Sangre de Cristos, and the fact that they were using it, in preference to the good road around by way of Las Vegas, would have caused any lawman to bush his brows.

They weren't the kind of men to talk of where they'd been and what they'd done lately. They exchanged grins and handshakes.

"Carr, you ol' son!" Boy Salso sang out. "*Com' 'sta, amigo?*"

"Hiya, Boy!" said Carr. "Good to see you!"

Now they rode side by side, as they had done in the more lawful days that seemed so long ago. They were old only in hard experience, and in their talk they went young again.

"That Abilene Lulu! 'Member her, Carr? There was a gal!"

"She sure was, Boy. She sure took you for your pay!"

Carr, weary of travel as he was, wished they were again pushing up that long cattle trail to the railhead for forty a month. He was sun-blackened, lean from missed meals, a bigboned man with a long jaw, faded hair, and deepset eyes that nowadays could afford only an infrequent glint of warm humor.

Boy Salso, dark as a Spaniard, was short by comparison. But he never appeared small. He was seldom at a loss for a light word and a surface smile. Handsome and debonair in a hard-worn fashion, his presence put bigger men on their guard, and nobody ever made the error of looking down on him. He was evidently down on his luck for the time being, for his companions, though tough, weren't top rank. Mexicali Red, an amiable Irish-Mexican, bore the signs of a horse thief and nothing much higher. Red's five fol-

lowers were from way off in Lower California, Boy told Carr. Baja Californios. Good hombres, but not special, not in the same class with the kind of men Boy had headed in his time.

Carr recalled that Boy Salso had once told him he was a Californio. He didn't ask Boy if he'd just got back from a California jaunt. He guessed it was so, for Boy had ridden into a flaming jackpot on the Butterfield stage-road a year back, lost his bunch, and vanished.

Boy Salso asked him, his voice low, "Say, Carr, how 'bout us teamin' up again? We could build up a good bunch an' run it right. We could go a long way. Red ain't my style. Oh, he's okay, but no brains. These Californios, they don't *sabe* this New Mexico country. We do, you'n me, an' we know the game. We always got along swell."

Carr shook his head. He was what he had become, a gunfighter, but he hadn't gone all lobo yet and he didn't want to. In his trigger-tiredness he wanted only a taste of peace. "Can't do it. Sorry, Boy."

Salso laughed. "You're a queer duck," he commented, and didn't push the matter. But his dark eyes were veiled when he added casually, "We're headin' over to Mora for a few drinks an' a spell. You?"

"Might's well," Carr said, and Salso's smile flashed widely and generously on him. Mexicali Red mentioned something about a couple of fellows they wanted to see in Mora. Salso sent him a look, and Red said vaguely that maybe the fellows wouldn't be there, anyhow.

THEY hit Mora in mid-morning and found only one saloon open. It was a cool adobe saloon, small, only one gambling layout in the place. The gambler at the table, playing stud for dimes with a couple of sheepherders, was garbed in a shabby black coat, a patched but immaculate white silk shirt, but no diamond stickpin or gold watch-fob.

"That's Crack Jack Mackaye," Carr remarked to Salso. "He's a big-time gambler. Was, that is, when I saw him in Juarez. Must be he's lost his lucky touch, pikin' a two-bit spread here."

Behind Crack Jack Mackaye sat a slim youth, as patient as when Carr had seen him in the gambling hall in Juarez, doing nothing, the back-watcher for Crack Jack. Carr noticed that Crack Jack's fingers were stiff and fumbling, and he guessed the reason for the gambler's downhill drift. Arthritis, and the loss of deft manipulation and easy confidence. Crack Jack Mackaye, dandy and king of the cards, was reaching bottom.

Maybe Crack Jack didn't intend to shoot. Maybe he was only going to demand a quick apology. But Salso got a gun out so fast it looked as if he slapped a fly from his belt, and he fired across the table. And Mexicali Red, with a gun already lined on the youth, said benignly, "Better not, kid! Better drop the little shooter, eh?"

It was all too smooth, like a previously planned job. The Californios lounged in good positions to command the front and rear. The one nearest the door threw a casual shot into the street and put a stop to the clumping of approaching boots. Carr said, "Damn you, Boy, what lousy

The stake in that last-stand game was the life of a broken-down, penniless gambler, and the destiny of a courageous frontier girl. That was the time, Carr Kincaid reckoned, to throw down his cold-deck cards and make tracks to a lawdog's hangnouse . . . or else play, like a royal flush, the grim black aces and eights of a dead man's hand!

"Right, Carr, he's out o' luck," Salso said lightly, and sauntered over to the gambling table and pulled up a chair. Mexicali Red and the Californio hardcases watched him with more than ordinary interest. The sheepherders quit the game soon, and a minute later Salso knocked the deck from Crack Jack's hand and said, "I want my cards from the top, tinhorn!"

Crack Jack picked up his smoking cigar. He appeared to be aware that trouble was coming. He had a veteran gambler's acute senses. His eyes were cool, fatalistic. He knew what kind of man he was facing, but he wasn't shaken. "You got them from the top," he said quietly.

"You're a damn liar!" snapped Salso, and right away things exploded in the little adobe saloon.

Crack Jack whipped out a pistol, and the youth behind him dug into a pocket. They were used to sudden flare-ups, frame-ups and emergencies, these two.

job is this? Red, don't you gun that kid, y'hear?"

Red nodded. "Not now he's dropped his shooter, I won't."

Crack Jack let his pistol fall on the table. He gazed down at his right arm, and when Salso remarked, "You'll have to learn to deal with your left," Crack Jack replied, "I doubt if I can."

Salso jerked his head. "Let's go!" He scooped up the cash from the table, and grinned at Carr. "Don't look so sore, *ami-go*. C'm on, Crack Jack, you're leavin' with us. You too, kid. Bring 'em along, Red!"

They trooped out. Salso blazed two shots down the street to keep it empty, and walked unhurriedly to the hitchrack. "Climb on that bay, Crack Jack. You, kid, take the sorrel. The boys'll find others for 'emselfs before they leave. Tell 'em not to hang around here too long, Red. Let's go!"

The Californios were light-heartedly looting the saloon, laughing like prankish boys at the bartender's protests. "Don't worry 'bout 'em," Red called. "They'll be along."

THEY made an afternoon siesta among the Ocate hills, in the shade of cottonwoods along a side arroyo. Mexicali Red and the Californios, who had caught up, made themselves comfortable with pilfered bottles of wine and cigars, and started a game of monte.

"Crack Jack dealt from the top an' you know it," Carr told Salso. "He was right when he called you a liar. I could call you worse!"

Salso flickered his eyes, but nodded cheerfully. "It's like this, Carr," he explained. "A gent back in Santa Fe offered me three thousand dollars to go to Mora, find Crack Jack an' the kid, an'—uh—persuade 'em to go to a certain place up near Raton where he's to meet me. He paid me five hundred down on the nail, an' he's to—"

"So you've sunk to gun jobs for chicken feed!" Carr cut in. "Three thousand isn't much for a dirty job like that, after you split it with Red an' his *ladrones*. What does the gent want with 'em?"

Salso shrugged. "He didn't say, an' I didn't ask. But you're wrong about it being chicken feed. I could tell he wants 'em bad—so he's goin' to have to raise the ante consid'able before I hand 'em over! We need a stake, don't we?"

"Not me—not that bad! I'm not in on this!"

"The hell you're not! Don't be so damn muley, *amigo*. I admit I ain't puffed up over this job, any more'n you. But it means cash, an' we need it. Don't tell me you're not in on it. You know better. You got a tall rep, an' the law's got its eye on you. You rode with us into Mora an' you rode out with us. Don't be sore about it. I figure I done you a favor. You'll thank

me later, when we head a good bunch an' jump into big money. Hey, I want some o' that wine. You?"

"How 'bout Crack Jack?" Carr asked, controlling his anger.

"Quit frettin'," Salso urged. "I've patched up his arm an' gave the kid some grub an' a bottle. They're all right. Let's go talk with Red. He's funny as hell when he's got a drink."

"I don't feel like laughin'," Carr growled, and walked over to where the wounded gambler and the kid rested under another cottonwood. Salso gazed after him, frowned slightly, and joined the drinkers.

Crack Jack looked up as Carr paused before him, and Carr could detect a desperate anxiety behind the calm stare. Carr said bluntly, "Some duck wants you two so bad he's hired Salso to bring you in. Got any idea who he'd be?"

The gambler smiled fleetingly. "I've made some enemies here and there. None who'd go to that expense, that I can think of. Might be a mistake. What's the price?"

"Three thousand. But Salso aims to make him go higher."

"H'm." Crack Jack's eyes stayed calm on the surface. "Call it five thousand, then." He moved his arm painfully in its sling. "Loosen this bandage a bit, Ollie, will you? H'm. I take it Salso is only in this for the money. And you?"

Carr watched Ollie's hands. They were small hands, nimble yet gentle. He scanned Ollie's face, dipped his searching look, and glanced away. He said slowly, "Count me out, Mackaye."

CRACK JACK MACKAYE'S eyes became keen and studying. He leaned forward, sitting on the ground. "You're Kincaid, the gunfighter who settled that Stair Peak scrap, aren't you? H'm! I'd sooner count you in. What I've heard of Salso isn't too good!"

He was a sharp and discerning man who could convey much in a few words. He said, "I'm Ollie's father. Not much of a father, I'm afraid, but still. . . . Look, Kincaid, what if I made a better offer than this duck you speak of? Would Salso listen? Would he do business?"

Carr nodded. He glanced again at Ollie and back at Crack Jack, and their eyes met in understanding. "He sure would. But the cash better be good, Mackaye. He's a bad devil to cross!"

"I think it'll be good," Crack Jack assured him, and now his eyes bored into Carr's. "But I want you in on it. I think you're okay. Stick with it, Kincaid, will you?"

Carr nodded again. "All right." Ollie's eyes, he found, were on him, searching his face. He called, "Say, Boy, step here a minute."

Salso rose and came over. He laughed when Carr spoke of Crack Jack's offer. "Him?" He stuck a thumb at the gambler. "A busted plunger offerin' big *dinero*? Carr, I'm s'prised at you! He'd give us a bum check. He's broke."

"That's right, I'm broke," Crack Jack admitted. "But listen. When I was a good deal younger than I am now, I fell in love with a girl up over the line in Trinidad. Her father was a banker. He still is, from what I hear, and rich. He couldn't see me as his son-in-law. She was his only child, and he had big ideas for her. So one day we eloped. We were married in Walsenburg. Then we headed south, because the old man was hot after us and I didn't want to have to kill him. His name is Rane Odum, if he still lives."

"He was alive when I passed through Trinidad a couple years ago," Salso said, flicking ash from his purloined cigar. "What happened next?"

"She died in Chihuahua," Crack Jack answered soberly, "soon after Ollie, here, was born. She—" he closed his eyes for an instant—"well, I went along from

there, till I got this cursed arthritis in my fingers.

"Few weeks ago," he went on, "I wrote to the old—hem—to that ramrod father-in-law of mine. I told him about Ollie, and how I was slipping. I thought he'd offer to take Ollie in. After all, the kid is the only kin he's got left. I haven't had any reply from him. He may have died, for all I know, and in that case—"

"In that case," Carr ended for him, "Ollie prob'ly stands to inherit a bank, no less! What d'you think of it, Boy?"

Salso twitched a dark brow. "Good story," he commented drily, but his eyes shone. "Got anything to back it up?"

Crack Jack dug into an inside coat pocket. "Marriage certificate. Ollie's birth notice. Couple other papers." He drew out a worn leather wallet.

Carr reached ahead of Salso and got the wallet. "I see a trip comin' up, Boy," he predicted. "We're goin' up to Trinidad!"

Salso let his hand fall, and eyed him thoughtfully. "This is big, Carr. Did you say to count you out? Oh, well, I guess any man would change his mind! So tomorrow we start for Trinidad, eh?"

"No, Boy," Carr corrected him. "To-day! An' that don't include Red an' the boys. They're all right, but they look like hell, an' Trinidad is a halfway respectable town with law in it! You an' me, Boy, an' the Mackayes, we'll make the trip."

"No, Carr," Salso corrected, smiling gently, but his eyes saying that he thought Carr was taking a hell of a lot on himself. "You an' me, *amigo*, an' the kid. Crack Jack stays behind, just in case the kid gets notions! The boys can take him over to an old hangout o' mine near Mosquero. He'll stay there till the deal goes through. If the deal blows up—well, he'll stay there, he sure will! *Sabe*, kid? Say, Carr, we'll be bankers yet!"

"Rane Odum may still be alive," Carr reminded him.

"So he may," Salso conceded. "So he

may. But that can be tended to, can't it? These big *ricos*, they want to live forever an' cheat the young'uns out o' their share. It ain't right. There oughta be a law! We'll take care of it, Carr. All we got to know first is if the kid is sure-nough in line to inherit the ol' buzzard's cash. We'll take care of it from there on!"

CHAPTER TWO

Amigo, Watch Your Back!

SUNDOWN found two hardbitten long-riders and a stripling by-passing Wag-on Mound and looking for a campsite for the night. "Kid," Salso commanded Ollie, "take a *pasear* over to that arroyo yonder an' see if there's any water in it for the horses."

He turned to Carr as Ollie rode off. "Y'know, it ain't bad, havin' that kid around to run my errands. Quiet button, ain't he? You're pretty damn quiet, too, come to think of it."

"Yeah," Carr agreed. A few minutes before, he had looked back, spotted a distant ribbon of dust, and guessed the cause of it. Only one or two of the Californios were escorting Crack Jack to the Mosquero hangout. Mexicali Red and the rest were faithfully following the trail, on Salso's orders. "Well, you know me, Boy. I don't talk much, somehow."

Salso slanted a look at him. "That's right, you never did. Me, I like to talk. I like—" His restless eyes fastened on Ollie, riding toward the arroyo, and he broke off. He studied briefly the style and swing of Ollie in the saddle at that distance, and suddenly muttered something and spurred his horse.

He had overhauled Ollie, halted both horses, and was reaching curiously for Ollie's shirt, when Carr caught up. Carr said, "No, Boy, that ain't necessary. Let's be decent. Yeah, she's a gal! I'm s'prised you didn't notice before—you, of all the

lady-chasin' *ladino's* I've ever known!"

For once abashed, Salso drew back his hand. "Booger me for a blind owl!" he gulped. "So she is! It was her ridin' I spotted. Y'know, that way women have o'. . . . You knew, eh? Well, hoe my row!"

"Leave her be!" Carr said.

"Huh?" Something in Carr's voice caused Salso to twist around sharply and level a stare on him. Carr sat motionless in his saddle, one hand holding the reins, the other dangling, his eyes blank and brooding. "What's wrong, Carr?"

"Nothin's wrong, Boy," Carr said, but he kept his right hand hanging. "Nothin's wrong, so long's you leave her be. We don't want to tangle, do we, Boy? We're too fast. Mean the death of us both. *No es verdad?*"

For a long moment Salso eyed him. At last he said, "You're right. Too much cash in this game." Then his surface smile flashed out. "Us tangle? Us? Devil take the day, *amigo!*" His glance dropped for an instant to Carr's right hand, and raised in far focus to the distant ribbon of dust. "Let her be a boy. But what's your right name, kid?"

The answer came in a low, breathless whisper. "Olive."

Salso wagged his head, chuckling. "Olive—Ollie! Hoddem! Olive Mackaye. There's a right pretty name. Ollie, the back-watcher for Crack Jack. Hoddem! I bet everybody figured the kid was a hot-shot shooter, sittin' there so quiet an' all. Carr, let's play the game out the way she lays. The kid's a boy, see? That goes. Forget I'm a—what was it you called me? A lady-chasin' *ladino*. Haw! That's good. But let's forget it, eh? Kid, go an' see if there's water in that arroyo."

The arroyo was dry. They camped by it, and watered their horses from their canteens. Salso scored a line on the ground with a stick. "There's your bed, kid, an' here's a blanket. We sleep over this side.

Sleep good, kid. You too, Carr," he said.

"I'm a light sleeper," Carr said.

Salso sighed and shook his head. "So'm I. Hey, let's buy the kid some good clothes when we go through Raton, huh? A gal can't go round in man's pants. It ain't decent. Eh, Carr?"

Carr shook the dust from his blanket. "It's your money, not mine. I'm broke."

"That's all right, *amigo*," Salso yawned. "I never invested in a better proposition."

THE lady who ran the Paris Emporium in Raton was consciously a lady. She made it obvious that she didn't approve of men buying dresses for girls. However, business was business, and one of the male hounds pulled out a roll of greenbacks that brought a sparkle to her spinsterish eyes. "I am sure," she announced in her best French accent acquired in St. Louis, "that messoors will be mos' pleased with my choice for m'selle."

The monsieurs, both of them, the one who was paying and the one who wasn't, held back judgment pending the result. Salso leaned on the counter as if it were a bar, and queried pleasantly, "D'you happen to know if Rane Odum, up in Trinidad, is livin'?"

The lady stiffened. "The Odum brothers," she answered with what she plainly considered asperity, "are still, I am sorry to say, paving their path to hell with gold! I sincerely trust that you—ahem—gentlemen are not friends of such s—ahem—sinners?"

"Not on your sweet charming life," Salso assured her, and won a gracious nod. "We're just interested, is all. Odum is a s—uh—sorry specimen, right?"

"Both of them," she stated flatly. "Rane Odum and his half-brother, Talbot Odum, are spiders. Predators! Rane Odum sits alone in his great big house—unloved, I'm sure—and tells his half-brother, Talbot, how to rob the ranchers and swindle the widows and orphans! Spiders, messoors!

Rats! My brother lost his ranch to them. They own many ranches now. They are rich. Who can fight against an army of gunmen? Hah! The dirty s—ahem—sinners!"

"Well, well," murmured Salso. He cocked an eye at Carr. "Hear that? Two of 'em. Not one. An' they rod a gunspread! Tough, huh?"

"Too tough for you, Boy?" queried Carr.

Salso flushed. "Hell, no! You?"

The lady, listening to them, jumped to a logical conclusion. She glanced toward the rear of her Paris Emporium, where Ollie was dressing, and murmured, "If you gentlemen do not wish for a disturbance, perhaps you should not stay here in Raton. Perhaps you do not know that Talbot Odum arrived from Trinidad this morning—accompanied as usual, by a *troupe* of gunmen!"

"Came down to meet me at the rendezvous," Salso muttered to Carr. "Troop o' guns, eh? That don't look good! That don't look—" He broke off. He drew a quick breath. "Hoddem! *Look!*"

Carr was looking. With Salso, he was looking at Ollie, coming forward from the rear. Ollie was dressed in a tiny bodice and flowing skirt of cashmere, and a rose velvet bonnet. She was a credit to the lady of the emporium. She was a slim and graceful little queen.

"She's—beautiful," Carr said, and bit his lip. He knew now the cause of Crack Jack's desperate anxiety.

"A jewel!" Salso breathed. "An' to think I had her run my errands! Her! Hoddem! I oughta be kicked!"

"I'll be glad to 'blige," Carr said. "I can kick a pretty hefty—" He stopped, his senses twanging, and swung on his heel. Somebody was entering the front door, darkening the floor with his shadow.

He looked at a tall man of near middle age, a man obviously of substance and authority, clad in respectable black broad-

cloth and fine twill, with the ruddy face and forceful eyes of a well-fed and well-served leader of lesser men. The man stared boldly at Ollie, first with admiration and then with a startled narrowing of his eyes. He cut his look then at Salso, and backed out, his lips compressed.

"That jigger," observed, "is the kind that can get too blasted familiar without talkin'!"

"That jigger," remarked the lady of the Paris Emporium, "is Talbot Odum!"

"That jigger," said Salso, "is the one who offered me three thousand dollars, Carr, in Santa Fe—for you know what!"

THEY leaned alertly against the counter, watching the empty doorway and the placid street beyond. They were two gun-hawks in a jam, with a girl to take care of. The idea had been to roll up into Trinidad in a hired buckboard, in style, Ollie the nicely escorted heiress. That idea was shot to blazes.

"Those four ducks he's talkin' to," Salso muttered, "are hot, Carr! Know 'em? Wing Lunt, Cheyenne George, Cass Dowe, and the other'n I don't know."

"Digger Deul," Carr told him. "Hot—yeah! Look, Boy, I'll watch 'em. You get the horses from the liv'ry an' bring 'em 'round the back, see? No buckboard. She's gotta ride saddle." He spoke as one trigger man in a tight to another, all side bets off. "Reckon you can get the horses, Boy?"

"I can try," said Salso.

"I want no trouble here!" stated the lady.

Salso eyed her meditatively. "Look. The bill's a hundred an' ninety, right? An' worth it. I give you two hundred an' fifty. Here 'tis. Those hombres out there, they ain't spent a dime here. Who're your best customers?"

"You are," said the lady, in plain Missouri. "Hodden 'em, who do those sons think they are, anyhow!"

"Now you're talkin'!" commended Salso, and left by the rear.

Carr kept his eyes on the street. He saw Talbot Odum stalk away from the four, and he grinned a thin and knowing grin. This Talbot Odum knew that Salso had crossed him, but he wasn't pitching in his hand, not by a good bet. Mr. T. Odum knew that there'd be no big holler if his men happened to gun down a pair of notorious longriders, even if the girl companion of the pair got more or less fatally hurt in the process. Here in Raton, the ambitious gateway to the Southwest, anybody was okay who killed a gunman, and the death of a gunman's girl could be hushed up. There was an unofficial bounty here on unwanted strangers.

Watching the four gunmen in the street, Carr said over his shoulder to Ollie, "Get set to ride when Salso comes by with the horses, y'hear? Get to the rear. I'll take care o' this end."

Talbot Odum's four gunmen did a neat job, as far as it went. They spread out. Two of them stayed on the opposite side—Cass Dowe and Digger Deul. The other two sauntered over. Cheyenne George stopped at the front window and inspected the display. He took a gold-piece from his pocket and flipped it thoughtfully. "Gotta get somethin' for my gal, Wing," he said.

Wing Lunt had moved on. He turned. "Well, let's go in an' get a bonnet." It was entirely natural, every step of it, calculated to get them inside the shop without arousing any suspicion. After that it would be a matter of shooting without warning, with Dowe and Deul ready to back the play.

But Carr got to the doorway first, and he was blocking it when they made to enter. He was following his policy of never letting the other side finish a powder-smoke pattern when violence was inevitable. He raised a somber gaze above their heads, and queried, "A warbonnet, maybe?"

They knew then that the play had failed, and they shifted immediately to another. Wing Lunt shrugged, stepped backward, and spread his hands as if in wry acknowledgement of defeat. Cheyenne George sighed and spun his gold coin high in the air, to catch Carr's eye. Carr obliged and looked up at it, and they drew. They were prompt and fast, a shade more so than he had figured, and on the instant he knew that one of them was bound to get him.

WHAT wrecked them was the bolt of pink muslin. It sailed over Carr's head, unwinding as it went, and dropped against Cheyenne George's chest. It was neither hard nor heavy, about as lethal a missile as a bag of wool. But Cheyenne George, considerably nonplused by such an unexpected arrival, dodged and got in the way of Wing Lunt. And Carr, partly draped like a Queen of May, fired through the rosy screen and jumped back, ridding himself of it.

Cheyenne George sank to his knees on the bolt of muslin, doing and saying nothing, too hard hit to raise his guns. Wing Lunt, left standing alone, wasn't too proud to drop down behind him, knowing that Cass Dowe and Digger were coming on the run.

Carr, retreating into the shop, got off two shots at the pair crossing the street and sent a third lower. He was trying to check on the results when he bumped into Ollie and all but knocked her down. "Dammit, I told you to get to the rear, didn't I?" he snapped at her, and hustled her through.

"Six dollars for the ruined muslin, please!" shrieked the lady of the emporium, crouched behind the counter.

Boy Salso, peering in through the back door, dug out a handful of silver and poured it on the floor, laughing.

"Thank you!" acknowledged the lady.

"Don't mention it!" Salso chuckled.

"Cheap at the price. I swear, Carr, I

never thought to see you wrapped up in pink ribbon! But that color don't hardly suit you, so let's get out o' here. I got the horses. Ollie, that was the most genteel bit o' wildcat pitchin' I ever saw. You're a real lady! I'm sorry I couldn't find you a side-saddle, you in that long dress an' all."

He ducked out ahead of them as he ended, and a gun thudded rapidly in his hand. "Watch the corners, *amigo!*" he sang out. "This town ain't friendly no more, if it ever was!"

CHAPTER THREE

Through Hell on a Stolen Horse

THEY sat halted in the darkness on the last rise of the road, overlooking the town of Trinidad. Salso thumbed a match, cupped its flame quickly to a cigarette, and puffed it out. "We've come a fair long way an' rolled up some trouble behind us," he observed. "Somethin' tells me, though, we're amblin' into a gold-plated jackpot here hot enough to singe Satan!"

Carr didn't reply. His eyes got a glint in them and his thoughts revolved around Ollie. It wasn't usual for Salso to worry about the unknown future. Carr guessed the cause. Salso had fallen hard for Ollie. It had become more and more obvious. And when Salso went overboard for a girl, nothing else mattered much to him. Probably he was sincerely reluctant to take Ollie into fresh peril. Nothing else could account for his worry. He was an odd duck in some ways. Carr waited.

Salso shifted restlessly. Silence irritated him. He had been edgy for some time. He said crisply "Look, Carr. These Odums, they got gun crews an' money. They know who Ollie is, that's sure—an' what's her welcome? They don't want her alive! That's sure, too. So where d'we stand? I been doin' a lot o' thinkin'."

"Maybe too much," Carr suggested,

then closed his mouth and said no more.

Salso waited for more, and at last turned abruptly. His eyes glimmered, and he said raspingly, "I'm callin' the bet off, see? The hell with the Odums—I can take good care of Ollie! I'll build me a good bunch an' be back in high money again. See? It stands that way!"

In the darkness Carr answered, "I been expectin' this. I got a gun lined on you, Boy! Don't move! I'll shoot if I have to. You know I will. I'm tellin' you the bet stands! We go in!"

Salso took the cigarette slowly from his lips. His eyes stabbed at Carr, searching for the leveled gun. "You want to see her killed?" He spoke it like an accusation.

"She might be worse off," Carr said. He figured he knew Salso pretty well. Boy Salso was no man for the long stretch. He had to have variety and excitement. "We go in!" repeated Carr. "We find Rane Odum's house. Then we do what seems best for Ollie."

He meant that he was ready to do anything to see Ollie safe and settled in respectable stability. A killing, if necessary. The risk of disaster was worth the objective.

"Damn!" Salso breathed. "You must know this game don't shine no more. Might's well try fight the United States for the Treasury! I never figured you'n me could ever split over a woman. But it's that, eh? Not the loot—that's out. It's her! All right, Carr, you got a gun on me. But you forget Crack Jack. You forget if I don't show up in the Mosquero hangout, an' give the nod—hah! You forget he's her father. Hell! You kill me, an' she'll never forgive you! Eh, gal?"

Ollie didn't say, but the blur of her face was white, and her eyes pleaded desperately with Carr not to shoot.

Carr kept his gun levelled. "Not kill you, Boy," he said. "Cripple you! Smash your legs an' arms! Scar you! Well?"

Salso sucked in a breath. "All right. So we ride in. It's your bet. But the deal's mine, don't forget! So we ride in an' put up at the hotel, an' we ask where Rane Odum lives. Okay?"

"A smart way to kick up trouble!" Carr commented.

Salso flipped the stub of his cigarette in a spinning arc, and laughed so loudly he roused echoes back in the hills. "You called the bet. I'm dealin'. We check in at the hotel! C'mon, Ollie! Shake up your nag, Carr! I said I'm dealin'!"

THE night clerk in the Boston House Hotel was a dull-eyed young man who looked as if his knowledge had outrun his supply of intelligence. He said he had three rooms vacant on the second floor, but when it came to signing the register it turned out that he'd mislaid the ink bottle. And one of the keys was missing. So he went off for ink and the key. As far as the three prospective guests were concerned, he never did come back.

The men who filed into the lobby, a minute or two after the night clerk departed, entered from the barroom next door. They came in quietly, almost sedately. They arranged themselves around the lobby, noticeably avoiding looking directly at the three travelers waiting at the desk, and Carr swept one swift look over them and muttered savagely to Salso, "How d'you like your deal?"

Boy Salso inspected them pensively. He chewed his lip, and forced a grin. "Pair of aces, ain't we?" he whispered, glancing urgently toward the front windows.

Carr followed his glance. He remembered the elaborately flipped cigarette butt and the unreasonably loud laugh, back there on the road. It occurred to him that Mexicali Red and the Californios could still be following the trail, could have recognized that as a signal, could be easing into town and gliding up outside. "You got draw-cards comin' to you, Boy?" he

asked. "Pair of aces ain't enough against a full house!"

He knew, from the way Salso cut a glance to him and back to the windows, that his guess hit close. He said softly, "Blast you, Boy, how d'you know they're good enough? You're takin' a longer chance with Ollie than I would, you cussed fool!"

He kept his eyes on a skinny, putty-skinned man, the first who had entered the lobby, judging him as the one who would open the play. The man caught his eye. He showed no gun in sight, but he wore a coat that could hide a lot of hardware and harness. He evidently concluded that disguised intentions had lost their cloaks, for he said to Carr, "I've seen you before, haven't I?"

Carr put his back to the desk and rested his elbows on it, and nodded. "It's likely." As always, he pushed the issue, knowing it was coming. "You were with the Harke

Syndicate in the Sandoval County scrap. I was with the little ranchers. I put a .30-06 across your scalp, an' we whipped you in that last fight. An' if you still got doubts you were whipped—" he let a grin tighten his mouth—"here's your second chance, Whitney!"

Barbed to a gunman's pride, Whitney shot to his feet. "So you're the son! I've had a headache ever since! Let's get 'em, guys!" His hands sliced up under his coat and plucked at the hidden armpit holsters.

KNOWING he was fastest, as well as he knew anything, Carr raked leather and fired. He put two bullets into Whitney and knew where he put them, and he yelled, "Boy, deal your draw-cards!"

Boy Salso raised an answering yell, the same he'd yipped years ago in Abilene when a couple of rambunctious kids smoked the gun-masters to cover and took off on the trigger trail. "Take 'em, hom-

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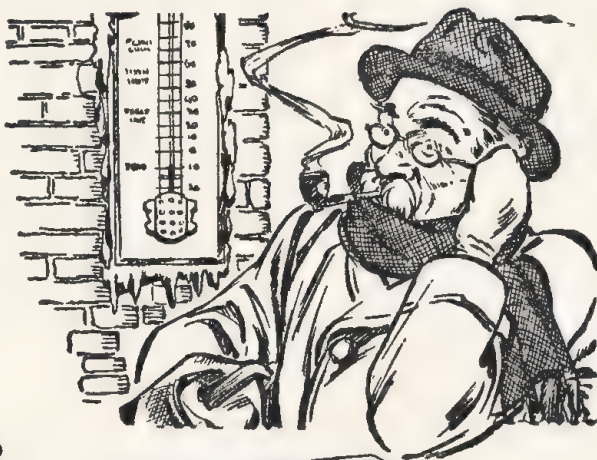
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bres!" he shouted, and fired a double blast and dived for the door, scooping up Ollie and carrying her with him. Ollie was small and light, and, willing or not, she went along.

In the flurry of drawn guns, Carr got his eye on one that veered to cut down either Salso or Ollie, or both. He thumbed a shot that connected with the owner, and lost his chance to save himself from another gun that lined up and blared at him. His head seemed to explode. He lurched blindly against the clerk's desk, his eyes jumping and out of focus, and sprawled on the floor, wondering dazedly if the hotel had turned upside down.

The crash of a front window jerked him to a foggy sense of direction, and he got an impression of the faces of Mexicali Red and a couple of the Californios, framed by the broken windowpane and lighted by the lobby lamps, glaring over spurting guns. Salso and Ollie were gone through the main door, their getaway made good by those guns at the window—and right then Carr dredged up sufficient sense to realize that he had lost his chance, too, of following them out by that route. To try it meant getting shot to rags.

He crawled around the desk. It had a foot of marble base, the only cover nearby. The gunmen in the lobby were being kept busy, but one of them spotted his movement, slammed a shot at him, and snarled in bitter exasperation, "He's still alive! Dammit, there he goes!"

Carr got behind the desk, vaguely conscious that the bullet had found him. As his eyes slowed their jumping, his mind grew clearer. He was able again to analyze sounds and evaluate events. Hoofs clattered off down the street. Two horses, he judged. Salso was getting out of the jam, and taking Ollie with him. Then another horse, and another. Red and his Californios were leaving, one by one. They were stringing southward out of town.

They were southward bound for the

New Mexico line, Carr suddenly realized in a gush of rage. Salso was pulling out of the game, making for his Mosquero hide-out, with Ollie beside him, after riding himself of a dangerous rival. When a pretty girl was the prize, Salso could shed off his ethics a lot quicker than a bull-snake could slough off its skin. "I ought've killed him on the road!" Carr muttered, dragging himself into the clerk's cubbyhole of a room. "I ought've cut down on him, for her sake, an' let Crack Jack take his chances!"

SOMEBODY in the lobby kept saying, "The boss won't like this—he sure won't like this!"

"If he figgers he coulda done better," complained another, "he oughta been here! Let's get that Kincaid cuss an' have his hide to show, anyhow!"

Carr got to his feet. They were coming after him. The firing had slacked off. A horse broke suddenly into a lope. A gun roared, and a voice said, "Did I get that last one? Did I?" The hoofbeats faltered, and there was the thud of a body fallen from the saddle. "I did!"

The clerk's room contained a couch and a dresser and no space for much else. Carr tried the window. It looked out on the bare space between the hotel and the livery stable, but it was stuck tight. A shadow edged across the open doorway. He slung a shot to hold it off, while he struggled with the window.

He wasn't thinking any too well yet, and when a gun flared into the little room and punched the glass out, he almost said, "Much 'bliged!" He crawled out through the shattered window, ripping his clothes and hide some, and landed on his head on the ground. Getting up and sluggishly finding his bearing, he made for the livery at what he believed was a handy sprint. It was a staggering, stumbling charge.

He climbed into the back corral, took another spill, and entered the livery from

the rear. Under the yellow light of a hanging lantern he saw two men at the front end of the barn, one the livery man and the other a stocky, elderly individual, their backs toward him. Where his chief interest fastened, though, was on a good buckboard and team. He stepped up into the buckboard and gathered the lines.

The livery man and the late customer were scanning the street, apparently taking notes on the fracas and waiting to see what would happen next. They spun startledly around when Carr commanded, "Open the doors wide an' get out o' the way, hombres, I'm in a hurry!"

He had a cocked gun in his right hand, and what with his bloodied face and torn clothes, he had a wild appearance. His expression didn't help, either. He was thinking of Salso.

The elderly individual flashed a badge. "Why, damn you, that's my buckboard! I'll—"

Carr slapped the lines on the team. "Stand clear an' keep your hands clean!" The horses plunged forward. The double doors were only ajar, but the buckboard wheels struck them and knocked them wide, after which they creaked to the full extent of their strap hinges and swung shut again in the faces of the two surprised men. The buckboard careened on one wheel in the street, made the turn with an inch to spare between it and the opposite boardwalk, and bounced into the ruts, going south.

"That son of a witch!" grunted the elderly individual with the badge, picking himself up. A swinging door had slapped him down while he wasn't looking. "Who was he?"

"I dunno," sighed the livery man. "You meet all kinds these days. . . ."

MORNING sunlight found the team plodding, dragging the buckboard through thick sand, the freshness of the cool night a thing of the past. Carr sat

slumped in the seat, played out, his aching body crying to stretch out and rest. Only his eyes were fully alive, watching the hoof-tracks that he was following.

Salso was heading south for Mosquero, that was sure, and avoiding the main trails and skirting around Raton, Maxwell, French, Springer and all the settlements the way down. But he had to make camp somewhere. Ollie needed rest. And Mexican Frank and the Californios weren't the kind to take any trek too seriously. Carr kept his bloodshot eyes on the tracks, and pushed the team along. He didn't know what he was going to do if he caught up with Salso.

He still didn't know, when a rifle report cracked and a spurt of sand flicked up just ahead of the team. He raised his eyes, squinted against the sun, and was able to make out some black dots atop the next ridge. "Here we are!" he said aloud, and didn't halt the tired team. The next bullet shrieked whisperingly over his head.

He tugged the lines and the horses halted. He climbed down laboriously and plodded on afoot. His guns were useless in this jam. He took them off along with their shell-belts, and laid them on the sand, and tramped on. In a moment Salso came walking down from the ridge to meet him, the bright sun sparkling on his polished gun butts, looped brass shells and silver concha belt. Salso never parted with his guns. He never would, he claimed, till he died.

They met on level sand. The surrounding mountains dwarfed them, and they said the common, small-meaning things.

"Howdy, Carr."

"Lo, Boy."

The hard and fierce exigency pricked at both of them then. Carr said, "You double-crossin' twister!"

Salso's eyes flickered. "Now, Carr! You're tired. You're—"

"You girl-grabbin' cuss!"

"Now, Carr!"

"You yellow quitter!"

That did it. Salso paled, then flushed redly. "Go get your guns! Come back with 'em an' call me that!"

Carr sneered at him. "You jelly-hearted son, you'd gun me cold 'fore I touched 'em! Pull your guns, you rabbit—I'll take you on with my hands! That's how much I measure you!"

"Carr!" Salso spoke through his white and perfect teeth. "I won't take that! Y'hear? I stopped Red on that last shot. I been feelin' sorry, thinkin' I left you in the lurch. Damn you, don't you say this to me! I'll kill you, Carr! So help me, I'll kill you!"

Carr grinned in his face. "Sure, Boy! Me with no gun. Easy, eh? It's got to be easy. You damn back-shooter! You easy-time trigger man! You're so tough! But will you take on a real tough job? Hell, no! You run out! That Odum job's plenty tough. Too tough for you, Boy. So you run out!"

Salso's pallor came back. His eyes were like dark diamonds. "Me? Hell take you, I'll show you! Go get your guns. We're goin' back to Trinidad! See? I'll steer a tougher trail than you can stick to! An' if we're still alive at the end of it, we'll take up this talk again and finish it, see?"

"I'll be lookin' forward to that," Carr promised. "Too bad we got to lay up a spell for the horses."

Later, he murmured to Ollie, "No, I won't kill him, don't worry."

"But what will happen to you?" she asked.

He rested his aching head in his hands. "Let's not look that far ahead," he said. But what he was thinking was, "I guess he'll kill me. He's mad enough to kill me twice! But by then maybe she'll be safe. Oh, hell, what am I worryin' for? I never did worry before and I'm too old to start in now."

CHAPTER FOUR

Shoot the Girl First!

RANE ODUM'S big house, the sheepherder said, was over toward Barela along the cut-off road. It was *muy grande*, he said, a great *casa* on a hill with all the mountains *en vista*. Everybody knew the Odum house. You couldn't miss it if you took the cut-off road toward Barela. "*Gracias, señores—mil gracias!*" He bowed with dignity over the silver that Salso put into his palm, and gave them the good, ancient farewell. "*Vaya con dios!*"

Given in the singular, the salutation contained a slight touch of sinister warning. But he was right about the house and its lofty location. They sighted it in the dark, up on its hill a quarter mile off the road, as big and white as a successful politician's mansion. They rode through the gateway, and prudently quit the private path and approached the house by way of the tailored juniper and grass.

"I don't see a light," remarked Mexicali Red, who had the right kind of cat's eyes for a horse thief. "There's the jumbo shack an' a kinda fancy bunkhouse, wagon shed an' barn—Cristo Columbo, what a layout! But no light. You like that, Salso? I don't!"

Salso nodded. "They might think we're trailin' south. They might still be smellin' along our tracks, don't forget. C'mon, let's find out. I promised my friend Kincaid, here, a lively trail, an' he's gonna get one!"

By mutual agreement they dismounted and led their horses forward, hands on holsters and eyes alert. They all knew the size of the task they were tackling. They were out to raid the headquarters of the kingpin of Trinidad, gun him out, set Ollie on the throne, and thereafter write their own reward. They were only five men and a girl—Ollie, Carr, Salso, Red,

and two of the Californios. To at least four of them it seemed worth the gamble. Carr left the buckboard near the gateway.

They reached the house. Its silent whiteness was oppressive, and Salso, never one to hold hands with patience, shoved the front door open and led the way in.

Only after they were inside did they spy the sliver of light. It shone beneath a shut door. Salso waited for Carr to move up to him, and together they crept to the door, and Carr turned the knob and they stepped in with guns drawn. They were side by side, as in the old days when they were very young and reckless, each knowing that the other would be there in any tight pinch. They were prepared to shoot fast and back out.

What they stepped into was a room lined with books, a room as remote from violence as a far planet. The sole occupant was an aged man bent over an open volume, absorbed in it, an enormous mug of beer by his side. He wore gray hair that reached to his shoulders, and his chair was the most elaborate contrivance Carr had come upon since viewing the first A.T. & S.F. locomotive that rolled down the tracks. The chair had levers and handles galore. It had everything but running water. It was a pip for anybody who wanted nothing but relaxation and lacked only an engineer's degree.

"Come in, come in!" snapped the elderly one absently, not taking his eyes off the book. "Tobacco in the Chinese box. Hope you don't want beer. Not much left in the cold-cave. Whiskey on the sideboard. Help yourselves."

They helped themselves at the sideboard. It was excellent bourbon and they didn't mind the beer shortage. Salso found some ginger ale for Ollie, and murmured to Carr, "If this ain't the damndest set-up! What d'you make of it? Is he crazy?"

Their eccentric host looked up. He

swung his remarkable chair around on its wheels, set it to a better angle with a touch of a lever, then leaned back comfortably and surveyed the group. "Humph! Never seen you men before." He wasn't crazy. His eyes, though bleared and bloodshot, were intelligent. His big hands were trembly, but fairly sure in their movements.

He noticed Ollie then, and his eyebrows shot up. "You must excuse me for not rising," he rumbled. "Heart trouble. Big doctor from the east warned me to keep off my feet and never exert myself in any way, or I'll go out quick. Do me a favor and pour some of that whiskey in this beer, will you? I like it that way. Hope you'll never come to the time, young lady, when you've nothing left to do but read and drink yourself to sleep. Not much of a substitute for real living. This is a lonely house most of the time."

Ollie took the whiskey decanter to him. As she stood before him, gravely measuring the whiskey, he saw her more clearly. He turned a ghastly gray, and his mouth gaped as if he were gasping for breath. "Oh, God!" he said hushedly. "You can't be! You can't be Faye! But you look. . . Am I mad? Girl, who are you?"

It was Carr who answered. He said, "She's Olive Mackaye. If you're Rane Odum, she's your granddaughter. It's more'n you deserve!"

THEY drank at the sideboard, five gun-slung men keeping their backs turned decently to the moving scene between an ailing old man and a young girl who was anything but unhealthy.

"It's a wonder to me the shock don't kill him," murmured Salso, glancing briefly over his shoulder and downing his drink.

"An' save you from doin' a murder!" Carr appended. "Look, Boy. I ain't bright, but I think I got this figured. Crack Jack's letter never reached this here Rane Odum.

Talbot Odum got it, an' bein' in line to inherit this geezer's cash, he didn't want any closer kin to show up an' push him out. So he took a trip down to New Mexico an' hired you to deliver Crack Jack an' his offspring into his hands—an' you can guess how he'd make 'em disappear, 'specially the offspring! Right?"

Boy Salso nodded. "Yeah. But where does it go from here? This guy's got to die 'fore Ollie gets the cash. 'Spose he's good for another four-five years, then what? We can't hang 'round waitin', can we? Blast you, Carr, I told you this game was no good! But you wilded me on! Okay, we'll toss for it."

"Toss for what?"

"You ask? For which of us'll plunk a slug in the ol' coot, that's what!" Salso's lips spread in a sneer. "Too tough a bet for you? It's too late for you to back out now! Hot for a high gamble, wasn't you? Well, I'm still dealin'. I'm callin' the game—an' this is it!"

He drew out a half-dollar. "Heads it's you, tails it's me!" He spun it, caught it, showed it. "Heads—it's you! Do your job, gamblin' man! Put a slug in him! Do it quick!"

Carr didn't inspect the half-dollar. Salso had unwittingly raised his voice. Rane Odum and Ollie had caught a few words, and were staring at them. The old man said belligerently, "Humph! What's this, girl? What's this?" And from some compartment in the intricate chair he dragged out a mammoth old. 44 Walker.

SALSO automatically slid one of his double-actions to light, but not quite before Carr unsheathed a black .41. "Hold it down, Boy!" Carr said, holding his gun level. He flipped out its mate and covered Mexicali Red and the two Californios. "Maybe you better drop it!"

He was a gone gosling and he didn't much care. The game was played out. It looked like Ollie had a good home here,

and that was what mattered. A good man would come along some day, and she'd forget the bad old days. She'd forget a parcel of tough trigger men who had once fought and died over her. He knew Salso and his third-rate little bunch would get him pretty soon after this showdown. You couldn't hold four hard hombres forever under gunights.

"We're pullin' out, Boy," he said. "We're leavin' Ollie here, an' we ain't comin' back. I don't think you'll kill Crack Jack. I think you'll turn him loose. Don't make me shoot you, Boy. You better drop that gun!"

A voice outside of the room said, "He better! You, too, or get your damn head blowed off!" It came from under the raised blind of an open window. It was the voice of Wing Lunt, and the affirming grunts at the other windows testified that he was not alone.

Carr looked around, inwardly cursing the generous prevalence of windows in this room. Every drawn blind was raised an inch or two, and under every one of them poked gun-barrels. They were smart, he thought remotely, to creep so close without being heard. They knew their jobs.

"We can fill this room so full o' lead a fly couldn't live in it!" Wing Lunt vowed solemnly. "I'd be sorry 'bout the gal. Do you drop your guns, or do we shoot? It's your call!"

Slowly, after intensive thought, Carr laid his guns on the floor. Salso followed suit, whispering, "Devil boil you, Carr, we're rooned! Plumb rooned! Blast you. . . ."

The two Californios, with more whiskey than sense, plunged for the door. Half a dozen muzzles flamed deafeningly into the room. The pair crumpled, and Wing Lunt queried, "Any more?"

Abruptly, all the sand ran out of Mexicali Red. He was a rambler, and had the devil's own nerve as long as he was out

in open country with a few kindred spirits. On anybody's range he could lift a bunch of horses, shoot his way out with them, and come back for more, laughing. But this was different, this being trapped in a room, gun-covered, his remaining two followers lying dead. His eyes bulged and his jaw quivered. He flung up his hands. "Don't shoot me—I ain't done nothin'!" he screamed, and Salso looked at him with something like shocked embarrassment.

"They *sure* got mustard—the color, I mean!" drawled Wing Lunt, and then Salso flushed like a shamed girl.

FOOTSTEPS sounded, coming through the house, and Talbot Odum entered the room, alone. Tall, sedately dressed, inclined toward a middle-aged stoutness, he resembled anything but an employer of gunmen, except for his eyes. His eyes were more than bold and forceful now. They were the calmly soulless, predatory eyes of a man who had rid himself of all human feeling in the pursuit of a ruthless ambition.

Rane Odum wagged his .44. "Talbot, who're those men out there? What do the fools mean by shooting into this room? They might've hit my granddaughter! My granddaughter, you hear? Faye's daughter, and her spitting image. This is she, right here!"

"Charmed, I'm sure," returned Talbot Odum dryly. "Allow me." He plucked

the big pistol from his elderly half-brother's hand. "Mustn't exert yourself, you know! We'll take care of the shooting! Those men out there are some of my crew."

Rane Odum frowned, giving his chair another adjustment. "What d'you need a crew of shooters for? What the devil's got into you, anyway? There's been something queer about you, ever since I fell ill and put you in charge of the bank. Everything's queer, for that matter. Nobody visits me any more. I'm like a hermit, while you dash around as if you're running all the business in the county!"

The younger man smiled faintly. "I'm running a good deal of it. The bank has grown under my management, by various means such as foreclosing on trick mortgages, forced sales and rigged auctions and so on. That's why I need my crew. Your one-time friends usually object to the bank's taking over their ranches and stock! Others question our branding methods, or get unpleasant when we claim their water. So do their neighbors. Force, I find, is the perfect solution—as long as it's done with some semblance of legality, of course!"

He spoke as if to a dull-witted child, and his cold enjoyment of it was obvious. He had deceived his half-brother so well and for so long, he had only contempt for him. "If any of your one-time friends ever visited here, it would probably be to shoot

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you!" he mentioned. "In fact, several times I thought they'd do it. But they've disappointed me. So have you. I fully expected you to drink yourself to death by this time!"

Rane Odum's bloodshot eyes bulged. "Why, you—you damned blackguard! You want me to die?"

Talbot Odum nodded. "Certainly! I was willing to wait a while for that to occur in due course, but the arrival of this granddaughter of yours forces me to hasten the matter! I don't intend to lose what I've gone to such trouble to build up!"

He turned a glance of chill anger on Carr and Salso. "You got her here in spite of all I could do to stop you, didn't you? I blame you, Kincaid, for that! I think you bulled Salso and his friends. When we showed up here, you had your guns out and you were laying down the law to them. That right, Salso?"

"Near enough," Salso assented.

"Dead right, mister!" blurted Mexicali Red, ashen-faced and shaking. "We wasn't out to cross nobody! He rode it on us! It was him!"

TALBOT ODUM scanned the horse thief, measured his terror, and motioned him over to the sideboard. He unloaded the .44 Walker, laid it and two of the shells on the sideboard, and whispered something. Mexicali Red shivered and backed away. The whisper went on, insistent, commanding, threatening. At last Mexicali Red, his face sweat-streaked and eyes glassy, nodded jerkily and with reluctance.

"Good!" murmured Talbot Odum, and left him there. He picked up one of the dropped guns, kicked the others out through the door, and said, "Salso, you tried to cross me, but I'll give you a chance. I'm going to leave this gun and one bullet on the sideboard, with the other. After I go, you'll use that bullet on Kin-

caid—a task which I'm sure you won't mind doing!"

He trusted nobody, certainly not his own men peering in at the windows over gunsights, for he kept his voice pitched too low for the words to reach them.

"Your friend over there also has a task to do before he leaves here," he mentioned. "But that doesn't concern you. It's a private matter between us!"

"I can imagine!" Salso slid a glance around at the windows. "An' I can imagine those jiggers blastin' us down!"

Talbot Odum shook his head. "They won't, I'll see to it. I guarantee you'll both reach your horses and make a getaway. I don't know what you've done with Crack Jack Mackaye, but when you send me proof he's dead, I'll send you a thousand dollars. Does that sound reasonable?"

"I guess it does." Salso walked over to the sideboard. "Yeah, I see how it goes. We busted in here on the ol' guy. We get in a fight, an' your jiggers show up. When the smoke clears, only Red an' me break out. We get clear, an'—well, when the coroner comes along you got nothin' more to worry about! We done the shoot-in'. Yeah, I get it. Pass me that bottle, Red."

Mexicali Red, sloshing a second long drink in three minutes and spilling half of it, pushed the bottle toward him. He took up the .44, fumbled in the two shells, and with drunken care set the cylinder. He peered around at Rane Odum and Ollie, and what he thought was craftily secret was a hideously naked purpose in his eyes. He downed his drink and stared at the gun.

Salso poured with a steady hand. He nodded shortly when the second pistol and one shell were slipped under his hand. And Talbot Odum, pacing on out, wore the satisfied expression of a shrewd merchant who had driven an excellent bargain.

CHAPTER FIVE

Born for the Owlhoot

SALSO slid the bottle back along the wet sideboard. "Quit shakin', Red!" he said. "Take another drink, an' it won't bother you so much!" To Carr he said, "Stand still! Don't try to jump us!"

Carr moved closer to Ollie. He felt her small hand creep into his, and saw Rane Odum swing his chair around and stare woodenly at his enormous mug of spiked beer. They knew what was planned for them. So did he, and there was nothing he could do to prevent it. The guns still poked in at the windows, most of them leveled at him steadily. He only wished he could bank on five seconds in which to get through the door and grab up one or two of the guns that Talbot Odum had kicked into the other room.

Mexicali Red had cocked the .44 and was turning, but at Salso's invitation he paused and took a last drink straight from the bottle. Salso loaded his one bullet and thumbed back the hammer.

"I kinda hate to do it, Red," said Salso. "No choice, though, eh?"

Mexicali Red spun the emptied bottle across the sideboard, and lurched around, the .44 upraised. "Aw, let's get it done an' the hell with it!"

"That the way you feel about it?"

"Sure!"

"Okay," Salso said softly. "*Adios*, Red!" He tilted the muzzle of his gun at Mexicali Red's chest and pulled the trigger.

Acting with surprising promptness and vigor for an old man and a sick one, Rane Odum grabbed up his mug of beer, reared to his feet, and hurled it up at the lighted chandelier. Salso, glancing upward with the intention of doing the same thing with his empty gun, ducked out from under a shower of glass and beer, took an unpremeditated header into the vacated wheel-

chair, and rode it backward into Ollie and Carr.

Among other remarks Salso rasped, "Damfool dingus!" He was hitting handles and levers in the dark, causing the chair to pitch and roll like a ship in a typhoon, while trying to get himself unloaded.

Carr, not helped in his leap for the door, picked himself up and tried it again. By now the men at the windows were yelling the alarm, two or three of them firing blindly into the darkened room and doing damage to the sideboard where last they had seen Salso. At the moment, Salso was fighting a trick foot-rest that persisted in cuddling his knees.

The door was partly closed. Carr banged it wide open with his head and a shoulder, and skated through on one heel. He let himself fall, glimpsing a pair of dim figures ahead of him, and sent his fingers scrabbling urgently over the floor for a gun. A flash and roar spurted from one of the figures. He flopped over, found a gun, and fired from the worst position he'd ever tried. Somebody coming behind him fell over his outstretched legs, landed on him, and swore fervently.

It was Salso. He had finally got hold of the .44 Walker. It boomed twice, and the second of the two figures became a lump. Salso rolled off Carr and went feeling over the floor like a swimmer. "Quit layin' around an' get to the front door!" he sang out. "Dammit, where are them guns? Ah—I got 'em! C'm on, Carr, let's show these sons a scrap! Who the hell do they think we are?"

THE house was far too large to fort up in for any length of time. On the other hand, the outside crew hadn't yet grasped what had happened. They were prowling around the house, waiting to see who might come out of it, and shouting for Talbot Odum and Wing Lunt to tell them what to do. Talbot Odum was still in the

main hall inside the front door, and so was Wing Lunt. They never would emerge from it alive, but the crew didn't know that yet.

Apparently with some reckless idea of leading a break-out to the horses, Salso took his exit through the front door, a pair of mismatched shooters spiking from his fists. He was driven back by a group that came footing around the house. He stood fast for a moment, the guns exploding like extra heavy firecrackers below his glimmering eyes, and split the pack, but another group showed up. Snarling like a reluctant wildcat giving ground, he got back in and slammed the door.

"Dammit, we're dead ducks!" he rasped. "Found any more shells yet, Carr? We need plenty!"

"Dead ducks!" said somebody strainedly. "That's right. Fly high and fall far!" It was Talbot Odum, on his back, his respectable black broadcloth and fine twill all twisted and awry. "Is this Lunt beside me? Is he dead?"

"I think so," answered Rane Odum, bent over him. "I'm afraid you're—humph—going, too, Talbot."

"A dead duck!" Talbot Odum said again, and uttered a thin, satyric laugh. "Think of it! I've schemed and worked—yes, worked hard. Built a rich business out of a small-town, small-time bank. Fooled you all the way, Rane. Even that so-called eastern heart specialist I brought in—a broken-down actor I picked up in Santa Fe!"

"What? That, too?" Rane Odum breathed harshly. "Nearly three years in that cursed chair! But those pains over my heart—"

"You old fool! You ignorant old fool!" Talbot Odum husked at him. His voice was weakening, but his ego remained puffed. "Nothing but cardiac neuralgia, brought on by alcoholism. You've drunk too much for years—ever since your daughter ran off with that gambler, I

suppose! I've schemed and worked. I've worked hard—damned hard. . . ."

His grip on life was slipping, and with it his mind. Like a very old man repeating a favorite story, he went over it again. Then suddenly he raised himself up on his elbows. "And just a six-cent bullet finishes it all! I'm a dead duck!" he gasped, and said no more.

They were shooting through the windows, those prowling outside, aware at last that something had gone off that was not according to schedule. Windows were crashing, and hard, high heels struck floorboards inside the rooms.

Carr had found his gunbelts, and stripped Mexicali Red of his. "Here, Boy!" he called to Salso in the dark. "Shells! Take that side room, an' I'll take the rest, or try! 'Bout as tough as that Abilene blow-up, this, eh?"

Salso got hold of the shell-belts. "Well, jist 'bout, an' maybe a mite tougher. Look, *amigo*, if I go down, don't ever say I was yellin', see?"

They grooved their shots, flung flippant words at each other, and kept the main hall clear. In the pungent and low-hanging smoke that swirled lazily over their heads, they swapped insults and jeers when a miss was scored, and gave each other sardonic advice.

"Paint your sights white—you'll do better in the dark!"

"Shoot fast. They don't wait!"

The firing broke, hesitated, and in the lull a thumping of hoofs swelled in the trim yard. A man called out something hurriedly, and the heels struck floorboards again and grew quieter after they hit dirt. After a flurry of gunfire that was outside the house, other hoofs stamped, and dug earth with swiftly increasing speed.

SILENCE followed, until an iron voice rapped, "You in the house, show a light an' don't dawdle, y'hear? Quick, now!"

It was the command of the Law. It couldn't be anything less, given in that tone. Salso, for once dismayed, muttered, "Hellsake, why did I ever leave Californy! We're sunk, Carr—we're really sunk!"

It was Rane Odum who, master of the house, went around lighting candles and lamps. "Come in!" he called strongly, and, like a good host, went into his study and busied himself at the bullet-scarred sideboard.

Carr found Ollie beside him. "Are you wanted?" she asked, and there showed her upbringing. She had the clean innocence of a young girl and the instincts of a lady, but her gambler father had taught her exactly what it meant to be a hunted man.

"I reckon I am," Carr said, and what he meant was that he hadn't taken much account of the law books in recent years. A man in desperate need did many things that a lawyer could tell him shouldn't be done. He guessed he was wanted, all right.

So was Salso wanted, and he didn't need any lawyer to advise him so. He followed Rane Odum into the comfortable big room, and put his back to the wall, guns holstered but hands on the butts. Nobody, in his simple philosophy, gave up and asked for mercy. You just didn't do it. You watched for a break, and took it when and if it cropped up.

The lawmen trooped in—a stocky, elderly man leading a squad of Trinidad's most lawful and determined citizens. The leader wore a badge, a small, gold one. He announced formally, "I'm Peter Small, United States Special Marshal, empowered to make arrests in the territories over such local authority as may be. Anybody here want to look at my credentials?"

Carr wasn't interested in his credentials. He was remembering that this was the man from whom he had stolen the buckboard. He placed the face, and muttered, "So help me, he's the one!" It was credentials enough.

Mr. P. Small, U. S. Special Marshal, looked the little group over carefully. His stony blue eyes dismissed Ollie, passed over Rane Odum, and searched for a decision between Carr and Salso. He said frostily, "A damned highbinder stuck me up for my buckboard an' team! Nobody's ever done that an' lived to brag of it! A sheepherder told me the driver inquired the way here. I come here, an' there's my buckboard near the gate! I want the man who took it! Begod, I'll feed it to him!"

Salso nudged Carr. "Let's get out o' here! He don't look like he's got any sense o' humor. Let's leave it to the ol' man, eh?"

They edged out, two owlhooters on the jump, their guns still smoking, and ran to the horses while Peter Small rapped a

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sharp query after them. Salso found his horse and vaulted lightly into the saddle. "Let's go, Carr!"

CARR shook his head. He was wracked by pain and very tired, and not too steady on his feet. "Make it, Boy!" he said. "Make it to that Mosquero hide-out an' let Crack Jack loose, eh?"

"Sure thing!" Salso found the stirrups. "I got nothin' 'gainst him. I'll let him loose, don't worry. C'm on, Carr!"

"I'm not goin' with you, Boy," Carr said. "I'll cover for you. I'll see you get clear. Then I'll go back in the house. I've rid enough, Boy. I've had enough."

Boy Salso, sitting with drawn reins, looked down at him. "I know what you mean," he said, and looked at the rising moon. "I wish she'd go with me. I love that gal. But it ain't so, for her. I mean, she don't—aw, hell! Good luck, *amigo!*" With a slap of his reins, he took off.

Carr flipped a hand in farewell, knowing he would never see him again. For all his faults, Boy Salso was still a better man than many who paraded the paths of virtue. But he had gone too far ever to turn back, and he wasn't the kind to try. He'd raise a tough bunch, score a dark track, and meet his blazing finish somewhere soon. He belonged with the wild ones, a short-lived breed.

Four of Small's possemen came hurrying out. Two of them, carrying rifles, stopped and looked for the riding target. Carr said, "If those things go to poppin' off, somebody's liable to get hurt!"

They took his meaning, and let indecision stall them. He waited until the hoofbeats drummed out beyond hearing, and he trod past them into the house. They followed behind him, silent and guardful.

In the lighted house Rane Odum was saying to Small and the citizens, "I've no ambition to be a rich man. Too old, for one thing. I'd like to show I mean it when

I say I want to clean the bank's name that my half-brother appears to have smeared pretty considerably. But to do it I need a man who can listen to cases, understand cattle talk, keep a clear head, and get tough if a situation calls for it. No business experience necessary, but good judgment imperative—likewise plain honesty, of course."

"Plus decent feelings," put in Ollie, "and—and—"

The old man gazed solemnly down at her. "And the ability to stick up a star lawman for his buggy, eh? That could come in handy any time! It's a tall bill. Who d'you recommend? That fellow who just came in?"

She nodded, smiling, her eyes shining.

Rane Odum sat down. "Humph! Well, he might do, at that." Discovering that he was sitting in the wheelchair, he sprang up and gave it a hefty kick that sent it reeling across the room. "Damned contraption! Yes, I think he's the man we want. What did you say, Mr. Small?"

The federal man cleared his throat and frowned. "I said I want him, too!" He looked around at his citizen possemen. Their faces said that they weren't with him on that deal. Some of them had lost property to the bank, and they were more than ready to shake hands with the man who was picked to adjust matters.

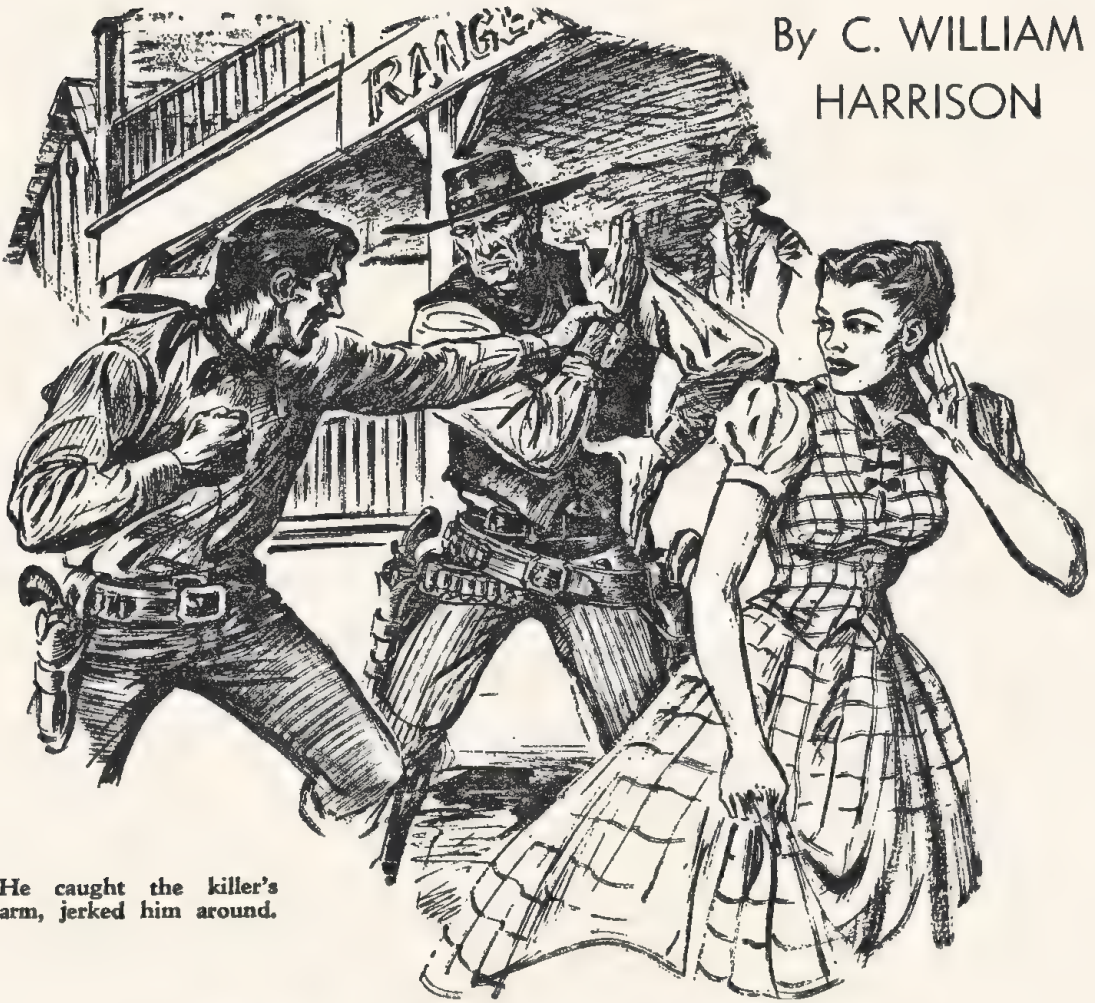
"We-ell, maybe he isn't the one," Small grumbled. "Blood all over his face, and just that one lantern for light. I could be mistaken. But look!" He stuck a stubby finger at Carr. "I know who you are! If I ever hear you've gone rampaging off, I'm coming after you! And I'll get you! You stay here, understand? You stay here and settle down for good!"

"I'll stay," Carr promised.

"He'll settle down," predicted Rane Odum.

"For good!" said Ollie, and said it as if she knew exactly what she meant.

By C. WILLIAM
HARRISON



He caught the killer's arm, jerked him around.

PEACE IS A FIGHTING WORD!

How could Dave Gordon protect the woman he loved against Branch Rowlan's hired killer . . . after he'd sold his honor, his manhood, and his guns in a brave man's desperate gamble—to buy a coward's peace?

HE HAD shot his horse, and afterwards he was sick. At this dawn hour when mist hung like a thin gray curtain over the bottoms of Sugar creek, it had been foolish for him to ride so close to that cutbank. He knew that now, and he had known it then. But there

would have been the risk of running into Branch Rowlan's men if he had ridden directly across the valley, and to have held his horse to the rock beds and willow thickets along the creek's channel would have taken more time than he had to spare. So he had tried to skirt the cutback, and

that had been his mistake—a bad mistake.

He didn't know how long ago it had been since the earth had suddenly caved out from under the feet of his horse. It must have been hours ago, for the sun was somewhere behind that ugly yellow pall that was rapidly blotting out the Bent Bow mountains, but it was hard to realize that he had been unconscious that long.

He had been brought awake by the agonized threshing of his horse, and the back of his head ached where he had struck a rock in that dimly remembered fall. His leg, pinned under the animal, was senseless, and he didn't know how badly it was injured. At the moment he didn't care. He could see the twenty foot fall he and his horse had taken from the under-cut bank of the creek bed, and as he got his arms under him and propped up his long body he could see the white splinters of bones protruding from the gelding's three broken legs. He felt a numbing jolt of horror, seeing that, and he twisted around as far as he could to rub the brown slope of the horse's neck.

"This is hell, Sonny. This is hell, ain't it?"

The gelding raised its head, whickered an appeal, and dropped its head again. Dave Gordon tried to free his pinned leg, but he couldn't. He knew what he had to do, but he kept trying to push the thought out of his mind.

"Sonny—Sonny, you want a sugar lump? Would a lump of sugar help, boy?"

Dave reached into the pocket of his denim jumper, found that only two lumps remained. He brought them both out. He arched his body forward, but he couldn't reach the gelding's muzzle. The horse whickered again, and a shiver rippled through its body, and Dave Gordon shuddered. He was a grown man, but he began crying soundlessly, with a hot wetness in his eyes.

He shifted his body around as far as

his pinned leg would let him, and again tried to stretch his hand across the horse's head. He managed to get the two lumps of sugar to the gelding's muzzle.

"Take them, Sonny. It's sugar, boy. Maybe it'll make what I've got to do easier."

The horse lipped the sugar, but it wouldn't eat. Dave Gordon pulled his gun then. He pressed the muzzle against the gelding's head, closed his eyes so that he wouldn't have to see, and pulled the trigger.

Afterwards, he was sick.

HE COULD hear the dull moaning of the sand storm long before the first gust of wind came slashing along the creek bed. He raised his head, and looked at the ugly yellow haze blotting out the sky. The storm was howling up the valley from the desert, and the vicious whipping of wind gusts was coming more frequently now, slashing his exposed skin with needle-sharp particles of driven sand. A storm like this one was going to be could kill a man unable to get under cover. It could blind him, or get into his lungs and bring pneumonia, or it could drift sand around him and cover him if he was pinned down as Dave was.

Dave turned his head away from the gritty bite of wind-whipped sand, and began trying to dig the earth out from under his pinned leg. He came to a large flat rock, scraped futilely at it, and knew then that he was licked. He stopped scratching at the rock and sagged back on the ground, and that was when he saw the man riding out of the thickening haze of blowing sand. The rider was following the rim of the cutbank, as Dave had done, and he reined in sharply as Dave yelled at him.

At first he didn't see the man and dead horse at the foot of the bank. He sat tall in his saddle, a lean, dry man with his hand on his gun and tension in the wary shifting of his eyes.

A thought drove into Dave's brain like a cold spike. "*He was following my trail—another of Branch Rowlan's hired guns!*"

The man saw Dave then, and for a moment he was motionless. His face was angular and grooved by deep-etched lines, and he had a thin, tight mouth. There was a chill in his quick gray eyes, and his long hand was taut on a gun half pulled from leather. Wind lashed at him and folded the brim of his hat as he sat there. Slowly he released his grip on the gun. He wheeled his horse, found a break in the bank, and came down. He reined in, and his eyes were quick and restless.

"You've had some trouble."

Dave Gordon nodded, and he thought bleakly, "*This fellow is a new one on Rowlan's payroll.*" The mark of the gunslinger was in his eyes and the balanced alertness of his body, the thin, dried-out line of his mouth and the hang of his guns.

The man's eyes drifted to the dead horse, and he shook his head faintly. "A man could grow mighty fond of a horse like that. I reckon it wasn't easy to do what you did."

"No." Dave licked parched lips. "It was plain hell."

"Yeah—sure." The man's eyes clouded briefly. "A man you can kill and not think much about—after you've done it often enough. It's different when you have to shoot a horse."

He uncoiled a rope, shaped a loop, and

dabbed it over the saddle horn on the dead horse. He backed his mount away until the man on the ground was freed, and then he shook his rope loose and coiled it again.

He laughed, a short, harshly ironic sound. "Kind of funny, me settin' you loose. Savin' a man's life is a little out of my line."

Dave sat motionless on the rocky ground, sweating out the raw agony knifing his leg as blood began flowing again. He looked up at the man in the saddle, and it took an effort to hold his voice steady.

"I'm obliged, mister."

"You're a damn fool if you mean that."

The man's voice was cold and friendless, like water running under thin ice. He said with sudden harshness, "You know who I am?"

Dave shook his head.

"Luke Shane!"

Dave took a slow breath and held it. This time Branch Rowlan had gone to the top of the pile; he had hired the best in the business to do his dirty work.

SHANE'S laugh was dry and bleak. "That's what I meant when I said it was a funny deal for me to be dragging that dead horse off you. The storm might have killed you if I'd left you pinned down. I saved your life only so I could throw a gun on you later and kill you. You're

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Dave Gordon. That's your name, isn't it?"

Dave nodded. He released his breath as slowly as he had taken it in.

Luke Shane said bleakly, "Branch Rowlan sent me after you. He paid me five hundred hard dollars, and told me to track you down and kill you. Now you know how this is."

Wind came howling down the creek bed, driving needle-sharp particles of sand against Dave's skin. The wind fell back to wait for the full rush of the storm, and Dave raised his glance again to the killer.

"Yes, I know how it is. I knew when I first saw you."

Shane smiled dispassionately. "I figured you did."

Dave tried to draw his leg under him, and pain came raking up through his thigh and into his hip. He stopped moving the leg, watching the killer quietly.

"You know anything about this trouble between Rowlan and me?"

Shane shook his head. "No. And I don't care."

Dave said bitterly, "I own a little strip of land at the head of this valley. It's not much, but it's enough to make a living for me and my wife. I've got a good spring on my land, and Rowlan wants it. He could sink a well in a dozen or more places on his ranch, but he'd rather spend his money hiring gunslingers to drive me out. That's Branch Rowlan for you, Shane."

The killer shook his head bleakly. "I told you I didn't give a damn about your trouble with Rowlan. This is just a job of work for me. Rowlan paid me good money, and I'm going to give him a good job."

Dave moved his hand farther away from his gun, and smiled dismally. "You'll never get an easier chance than now."

"I never do a job unless the other man's in shape to fight back. That leg ain't busted or you couldn't have moved it a minute ago. How soon before you're able to get around?"

The yellow head of the sand storm was moving closer now, and Dave wondered if Mary would be ready for it. He worried about her, because he knew his wife would be worrying about him. If he could get to his feet he might be able to walk the two remaining miles to the home ranch before the full force of the storm struck.

"How long, Gordon?"

Dave looked steadily at the killer. "Two days."

"I'll be in town waiting for you," Shane said coldly. "If you don't show up, I'll be coming out after you."

Dave got his leg under him, and slowly pushed to his feet. He bent for a moment against the agony raging through his leg, and then he straightened again.

"I'll be there, Shane," he said bitterly. "I'll be there, but I won't fight you. I killed the first gunman Rowlan sent after me, and I've been sick about it ever since. I wouldn't fight any of the rest of them, and I won't fight you."

Luke Shane's smile was gray, thin. "That's what you think, Gordon. That's just what you think."

MARY was waiting at the window when Dave got home. The storm had caught him a mile out from the house, howling and clubbing at his back with winds that were desert-hot and clouded with sand. He pulled his hat brim lower and tied a bandana across his lower face, and limped on. It wasn't until he came against the corral gate that he realized he had passed within a few yards of the ranch house without seeing it.

He turned back, groped his way around the house until he located the door. Dust and sand went into the house with him. He leaned back against the door to close it, and saw his wife turn away from the window.

"Worst sander we've had in a long while," he said.

Her eyes took a swift inventory of him,

and he saw their abrupt release of anxiety. That was what he hated most about this trouble with Branch Rowlan; it was Mary who took the real beating. Dave had his work that took him away from the house. Physical activity and the day-by-day problems of water, graze, and line-riding took some of the edge from the constant threat of danger Branch Rowlan held against him. Dave had a man's phlegmatic fatalism. It was different with his wife. Mary was trapped all day by the four walls of her house and by an imagination that nagged her with phantoms of dread. Dave knew how it was for her, even though she never complained.

She saw the way he held his leg, and some of the color drained out of her cheeks. "You're hurt, Dave."

He smiled reassuringly. "The bank caved under me a couple miles back on the creek." He took his sack of tobacco dust from his pocket, and began shaping a cigarette. His fingers trembled slightly. "I had to shoot Sonny."

He didn't look up at her; he knew the swift melting pity that would be in her eyes.

"I'm sorry to hear that, Dave." He was glad she said nothing more. He had babied and trained the horse since the day it had dropped, and he didn't want to remember what he had been forced to do back there on the creek bottoms.

He hobbled to a chair and sat down. Mary fed wood into the stove, heated water, and filled a tub to soak his leg. Wind howled around the cabin, and sand sifted through the cracks around the windows. The cattle would drift in this storm, and he absently began shaping a plan for rounding them up again. He refused to think about Luke Shane.

Mary said, without raising her head from his leg, "Anything happen in town?"

"Sam Breathitt gave me an extension on the bank note," he said. He didn't tell her that Rowlan was putting pressure on

the bank to buy the note. "I had Charley Thall set aside a dress cutting of that blue moire you were looking at in his store last week."

Mary said softly, "You shouldn't have done it, Dave."

"Wanted you to have it, Mary."

She bathed his leg in the hot water, and brought him a towel. After a while, she said, "One of the Walking-W riders stopped by yesterday. He said that Branch Rowlan had hired a new man." She raised her eyes and looked directly at him. "This one is Luke Shane."

The smoke from his cigarette was flat and tasteless in his mouth. A lock of hair had fallen across Mary's forehead. He reached out and tucked it back into place, and for a moment he looked at her soft mouth and finely textured skin and was amazed for the hundredth time that she had ever let herself become his wife.

Suddenly she said, "You met Luke Shane, didn't you?" and the bright gloss of dread came back into her eyes.

"Yes." He nodded, and his smile was faintly wry. "Sonny had me pinned down, and it was Shane who got me loose. He saved my life maybe, and then he said he was going to kill me."

HE KNEW that his wife wanted the full story. He said, "It doesn't mean anything, Mary. I wouldn't fight any of the rest, and I won't fight Shane. As long as I refuse to fight, Rowlan's hands are tied. He'd have one of his men shoot me in the back if he thought he could get away with it. But he knows he can't, because the sheriff has warned Rowlan what he'll get if I'm ever found dead out on the range." Dave smiled grimly. "The only way Rowlan can get me is in town where there are witnesses. All Luke Shane can do is what the rest of them tried—insult me and force me into a fight. It didn't work with the others, and it won't work for Shane."

Mary straightened from the tub of water, and looked down at Dave. She was a small woman, slim and straight, with rich brown hair molding the pure lines of her face.

She said softly, "You can't keep running from them, Dave. They'll keep hounding you until one day the county will begin calling you a coward. Then you'll do what Rowlan wants you to do—you'll give his gunman a chance to kill you."

"No." Dave said. His mouth tightened and turned hard. "I killed once, and I'll never shoot another man down. And I'm not afraid to be called a coward."

The second day after the sand storm, Dave hitched up the buckboard and drove to town. Mary went with him, refusing to stay at home. As he pulled off of the county road into main street, he knew the town had been prepared for trouble. It was in the eyes of the men who followed the movement of his rig down the street, a wariness and a guarded curiosity for the way Dave would meet the challenge of Branch Rowlan's newest gunman.

Dave swung the rig in at the hitch rail in front of Charley Thall's store, and handed Mary down. She raised her eyes to him and gave him a smile that she wanted all watching eyes to see.

"I have some shopping to do," She touched his arm briefly, and then pulled her hand away. "You do what ever you have to do, Dave."

Dave nodded, and watched her go into the store. He was wearing his gun, as he always did, and he knew the town was waiting to see if he would use it against Luke Shane. He thought of that bitterly, and with a knifing of contempt. The town and the county understood what Branch Rowlan was trying to do to him, and they had understood at first why he refused to fight. Now they were beginning to forget. They were seeing only what was on the shallow surface—the challenges he refused to accept, and the insults that he swallowed

and the taunts that he ignored. They were forgetting that he had fought and killed once, and now the town was beginning to think of him as yellow.

He moved unhurriedly along the plank walk, nodding to acquaintances and seeing the reserved curiosity they held for him. In the feed store he had to wait longer than usual for Ben Melrick to lay aside his office work and see him.

"I'm going to have more alfalfa hay than I need again this year, Ben. I'm wondering if you're ready to take the usual wagon load off my hands?"

There was a coolness in Ben's eyes, an indifference. Ben looked away, and frowned uncomfortably. "Things are different this year, Dave. I had another offer, and I don't figure I'll be needing your hay. Just one of those things, Dave."

"I see," Dave murmured. He smiled faintly. "I see how it is, Ben."

HE TURNED away and saw Luke Shane waiting for him on the street. The man stood lean and tall against the sunlight, a cold and friendless shape with an implacable patience in the poise of his body. Only Shane's eyes changed as Dave came out on the street; they thinned down at the corners and some thought in them sharpened and brightened.

"I see you showed up, Gordon," he said.

"Did you think I wouldn't?"

"No," Shane said in his slow, dead tone, "I figured you would be here." He held up one hand as Dave started to turn away. "You're not going any place, Gordon."

Dave heeled around slowly, and faced the killer. He said quietly. "I told you once, Shane. I wouldn't fight the others, and I won't fight you."

Men were beginning to show themselves along the street, watching and listening. Branch Rowlan's crowd was in town, as he had known they would be. Dave changed the angle of his glance and saw Rowlan watching from the gallery above the

Rangeman's Hotel entrance, a big, loose-fleshed man with heavy, arrogant features and small humid eyes.

Luke Shane's voice pulled Dave's attention to the street again. "I've been hearing talk about you being too yellow to fight, Gordon."

Dave smiled thinly. "Men like to talk. What they don't know, they can always dream up. Talk is a lazy man's occupation."

Shane's mouth twisted, and he called Dave a name.

Anger was in Dave, but he held it stubbornly back, setting his shoulders rigidly



Branch Rowlan . . .

against it. "I've got things to do, Shane. You're only wasting your time as well as mine."

He turned away, and he heard the unfriendly murmur that ran the street. He refused to listen to it. He started past the gunman. Luke Shane's hand speared out, caught his arm, and jerked him violently around. There was no hatred in Shane's eyes, no temper, nothing personal. He was a man hired to do a job, and was trying to do it. He was coldly passionless, and he was all the more cruel because of the pure objectiveness that drove him on. He raised his hand and slashed his knuckles across Dave's mouth; he brought his hand back, and left the imprint across Dave's cheek. Dave held the smile rigidly to his bruised lips.

"That make you feel any better, Shane?"

The killer's eyes widened wonderingly. "My God, man, what does it take to make you fight?"

"More than you can do," Dave said.

He swung away, and walked on. Some man down the street hooted derisively at him, and he tried to shut the echoes of that contemptuous sound out of his mind. He couldn't do it. The sneering cry kept coming back at him, like acid burning into the core of his pride. He had known that sooner or later it would be like this, but he had never imagined it would be so hard to take.

He heard Branch Rowlan's mocking shout cut down at him from the hotel's gallery. "How wide is that stripe down your back, Gordon?"

He raised his eyes and stared at the man on the roof over the hotel's entrance. He stared at the rancher with bitterness raking wildly through him and hatred cutting at the taut threads of his patience. He started to wheel toward the killer behind him, and he locked every muscle rigidly. That was what they wanted, for him to turn and accept the killer's challenge, and he stubbornly refused to be baited into that.

HE TURNED abruptly and stalked into a saloon, feeling the heated pressure of eyes following him. The bar was empty, and Gus Kinsey came indifferently to him along the mahogany counter. The bar-keep's grin was slow and pointed.

"What will it be today, Goddard—milk?"

Anger came rushing up through Dave's nerves, defiantly. "Yes," and he listened to the harshness in his voice. "Milk!"

Kinsey laughed mirthlessly, turned away, and poured a glass of milk. He set it on the bar in front of Dave. A puncher came drifting up, chuckling acidly.

"That's the right kind of drink for some men."

Dave turned, caught the puncher's shirt, jerked him around, and hit him. The man

went down, started to get up in a wild flare of temper, took another look at Dave, and changed his mind.

Dave drank the milk in a room that was heavy with silence. He set his glass down, and looked long at the barkeep.

"Be mighty careful, Gus," he said.

He turned, hating the saloon and the thoughts lacing at him from watching men. He went outside, tried to roll a smoke, and failed. He couldn't stop the nerve-taut trembling of his body, and he recognized the danger in that. He was on the edge of cracking, and he knew that was what Branch Rowlan and Luke Shane were waiting for. He had thought he could see this through as he had with those other gunmen Rowlan had sent against him, but now he knew he couldn't. It was different this time. He had the town watching him with a contempt it had never shown him before, silently and derisively, and that made it different. He was not bucking one killer; he was bucking the entire town.

He went across the street, walking fast now. He went into the store, found Mary at the counter, and touched her arm.

"We're going home," he said.

She turned and looked at him. Her eyes turned wet, and she looked quickly away. "All right, Dave."

She held her head high and proud as they went out the door. Luke Shane was prowling along the street toward them, and Dave turned his wife quickly toward the rig. Shane came around the buckboard, and a cold stillness came into the air.

Shane spoke in a thin-edged voice. "This is just a job with me, Gordon. It's straight business, and I've never had to do anything like this to make a man fight."

He pushed Dave aside, caught Mary's arm, and pulled her to him. He held her head back, and he was watching Dave as he bent to kiss her. Something broke inside Dave then, a wildness and a bitter, slashing hatred. He took a long step forward, caught the killer's arm, and jerked

him around. Shane released the girl, stepped back, with his hand driving down to his gun. Dave hit him in the face.

Dave walked against the killer, slamming his fists out with a savage, unthinking rage. Shane tried to break away, but Dave wouldn't let him. He clubbed his fists to the face and body, and ripped blood from Shane's mouth, and tore the air from the man's lungs with vicious body blows.

On the hotel gallery, Branch Rowlan shouted harshly, "Shane! Get him—kill him!"

DAVE pinned the killer against the buckboard and held him there with short, shoulder-driven blows. He saw Shane sag and start to go down, and he whirled savagely toward the hotel. He threw his voice bitterly up at Branch Rowlan.

"You've sent too many killers after me, Rowlan. You want me dead, you can have the job of killing me yourself."

He pulled his gun and started toward the hotel in long running strides. He saw fear knife into the loose folds of Rowlan's face, and he saw Rowlan grab out his gun. The man fired, and dust gouted up from the street at Dave's feet. Rowlan fired again, too quickly and too frantically, and his bullet went wide.

Panic rushed out in the rancher's thin-pitched yell. "Get him! Stop him, somebody!"

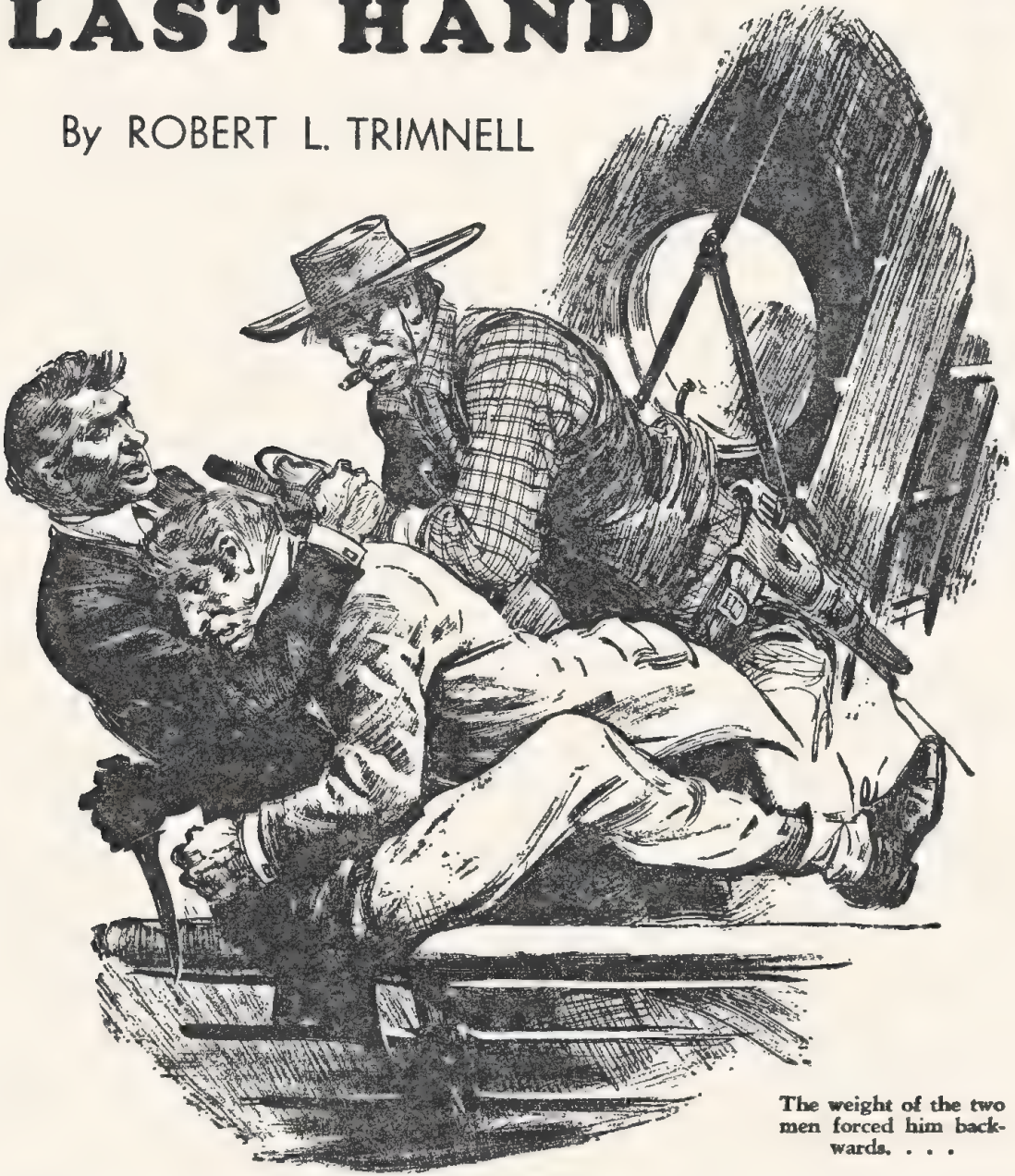
He triggered wildly at the man on the street, but still Dave ran on. Then he was under the gallery, and pounding into the hotel lobby. A white-faced desk clerk flashed a startled glance at him and ducked out of sight. He went up the stairs four at a time, turned into the corridor that led to the gallery, and saw Rowlan's hastily fired bullet rake a long furrow through the plaster at one side.

He came out on the gallery and saw the fear and panic that contorted Branch

(Continued on page 129)

RIVER TINHORN'S LAST HAND

By ROBERT L. TRIMNELL



The weight of the two men forced him backwards. . . .

Jack Clint knew that the murdering tinhorn would make one last desperate try to cheat the gallows. . . . But how could he guess that Dawset would even kill to steal the hangrope—then loop it around his own tough neck?

WITH a clanging of bells and the jarring of reversing engines, the stern-wheeler *Emily Emmet* slid toward the Texas shore. On the main deck Bosun Bull James roared out orders to swing down the gangway. A bandy-legged Irishman threw the line loose from

a chock, and he and the lanky Texan eased the rope out through the block and tackle to lower the gangway slowly to the dock. A couple of roustabouts hurried some small barrels down the gangway, others began passing boxes. The two deck hands secured their lines.

"Damn you, Jack Clint!" yelled the bosun. "When you going to learn to tie a proper knot! Come up here!"

The Texan frowned. For a moment his eyes searched the dock, where passengers were gathering for the upriver run. He shook his head. Then he hurried forward, a lanky fellow with a wide, jutting chin, hobbling along in flat-heeled shoes that he couldn't seem to get used to. He stopped before the bosun.

Bull James was a powerful man, in the habit of leaning a little forward, the stumpy pipe in his mouth always pointed ahead in the direction he was going.

"You cowhands talk big about rawhide riatas and grass spun ropes!" the bosun shouted. "But you can't fake down honest manilla line! And can't even put a bowline knot in the end of it!" He held up the free end of a coil of rope.

Jack Clint knew that a slip knot was seldom used on a river boat. And when you wanted a fixed loop, you made a bowline. It could be thrown on a bollard and would hold fast, and to take it off you just flipped it over the post. It wouldn't draw tight. But a slip knot would tighten every time.

"You figger me to have this thrown down to the dock?" Bosun James's face burned bright red and the pipe in his teeth jerked angrily. "You figger to have those dock loafers see slipknots thrown over by Bull James's crew? You on this steamer for the fun of it?"

Jack stuck his chin out at the bosun. "You know why I'm aboard, Bull."

The bosun's face fumed to a brighter red, then sobered. He took the pipe out of his mouth and inspected the bowl.

"Yeah, I know," he said quietly. "And I warn you, Jack. If I see him before you do, he's going over into the paddle wheel. No law court stuff for me. He ain't worth it." The bosun took a package of tobacco from his pocket and thumbed some into the bowl of his pipe. He lit up, and then his expression changed. "Damn you!" Get down to the dock and secure the lines. Think this is a cow ranch we're runnin' here?"

Jack turned and hurried down the gangway to the dock. The Irishman had thrown down several lines already, besides the two which were secured to the bollards. Jack put bow and spring lines on, noticing on each one the well-made bowline knots that he seemed to have such trouble with. Maybe his mind was on hangknots. Somehow he couldn't manage the bowline. He'd used too many riatas, grass or rawhide, and all with sliding knots. At least, he'd used a lot of them up until the last two months. Then it had been bowlines, with the deck crew of the *Emily Emmet*.

He glanced up at the river steamer, at her gleaming white paint and dazzling brass rails. He knew why they dazzled. Elbow grease, and much of it applied by Jack Clint. He looked back at the stern paddle wheel, motionless now. The wheel that Bull James talked of throwing a man into, to be chewed to a bloody pulp. Bull had his own ideas about justice. And Jack Clint had his, inherited from his father.

Jack secured the last of the lines to the dock, watched while the Irishman hauled in taut and faked them down to the deck cleats. Then he turned and glanced once at the shanties and unpainted buildings of the ramshackle river town. It seemed that he hadn't noticed much of river towns these last two months. He'd been too intent in looking for a certain man. And that was when he suddenly and unexpectedly saw him.

IT CAME as a shock, for he hadn't been searching, just glancing casually at the river town. He stood there numbly, while he took in the man's face. Pale white and narrow, with a long nose, long black sideburns running almost to the point of his chin. A tall man, in well-cut black clothes and a kelly-green vest. Neat, all the way around. Which was why you noticed the large wart on the right side of his nose. That was what old Fred Clint had remarked about. It had been Jack's first clue.

Jack managed to straighten his shoulders. He could see nothing but the wart and the slight bulge in the man's left pocket, and he felt nothing but murderous hate. But even then he controlled himself. The man would not be chewed up by any paddlewheel. He would wear a lawful hemp necktie to his death. For that was Jack's way. Old Fred had taught him well. A sixgun was for killing rattlers and pounding staples—and bringing men before the justice of the law.

He hardly noticed the stocky man who tramped heavy-footed beside the man with the wart. He was as well-dressed, but the expensive clothes didn't fit the stocky man. His face was heavy and brutal, the face of a man whose mind moved in quick, cruel paths. No trace of the devious ways that marked the face with the wart.

Jack hiked up his rough riverman's pants and rolled the sleeves of his shirt a

little higher on his bare arms. He walked slowly up the gangplank behind his quarry. They didn't notice him. They'd never seen him before, as Jack had never seen them. They only saw a tall, sunburned youngster wearing an old river pilot's cap. He picked up a rope on the deck and began coiling it, while he listened to the purser taking their passage money.

"Name?"

"Uh, Dawset. Willard Dawset."

Jack heard the voice, loud and clear. He heard the hesitation, too, as though the man was picking a convenient name. But Dawset would do. He could stand trial and hang by the name of Dawset as well as any other. He heard the other man mention the name of "Jim Crug." A low growl was the stocky man's way of speaking.

A minute later they left for their cabins. But Jack didn't leave. He meant to stay by the gangway. To make sure that those men didn't go ashore. He had things to think about, too. Things like the letter from his father, over two months before. The last letter he ever received from Fred Clint. It read:

This should reach you before I get home, because I'm dropping it off at Clayton and it will go on by stage. I'll continue on the river. It's comfortable although a longer trip. Ran into my old friend Bull James again.

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**CHEST COLDS • SORE THROAT
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He's the bosun. A real good man.

Worried about the money. I caught a man searching my cabin. One I played poker with. Said he was in the wrong room. A pale man with a wart on the right side of his nose. . . .

There was more, but that was what kept burning through Jack's mind. That, and the fact that ten thousand dollars for cattle that Fred Clint had sold down the river was gone. It had disappeared completely. But not Fred Clint. His body was found two days later. It looked as though a pistol butt had crushed his skull before he went over the side of the steamer.

IT WAS clear moonlight. Jack Clint sat on a pile of cordwood on the main deck, oiling a Colt .45. That was where Bull James found him.

"He's aboard, eh?"

The lanky Texan nodded. He shoved six shells into the gun and closed it with a snap.

"I can't figure it, Jack. You got more reason to kill him than I have. Fred was your father. I knew him off and on for years." Bull put his big hands together and cracked the knuckles. "We sat out here on the cordwood that last night and played checkers by lantern light. I hate to see a good man get what he got. And I'm going to kill the wart-nose that did it!"

"Doesn't seem like much reason for you to kill the man."

Bull pushed to his feet. "I've killed men before, Jack. This river has been a mighty lawless stream at times. Sometimes I got to take the law into my own hands." He turned on his heel and tromped up forward, leaving a faint smell of pipe smoke behind.

Jack sat there for a while after the bosun left. The water was quiet, its mud-diness glazed over with moonlight, stretch-

ing away far on each side of the river boat. Slow waves spread out as the stern-wheeler passed, undulated on until they were lost in the distance.

Jack slid off the pile of cordwood. He jammed the .45 inside his right pocket, covered the protruding butt with his hand. He was puzzled as to how to find Dawset. He went aft, through a passageway. Passengers were drifting about the decks, talking quietly, filled with a sense of after-dinner comfort and ease. Jack glanced among them, hoping to see Dawset. He covered the main deck, then went all the way aft.

He saw Dawset there, standing before the spray thrown up by the huge paddle wheel. The man was staring at the wheel, hands braced on the rail, smoking a cigar. He was a dim figure with the mist drifting around him, but a figure Jack wasn't likely to forget.

Jack approached him. "Dawset?"

The man turned. One hand left the rail and slid into a coat pocket. He eyed the bulge in Jack's pants pocket, and the lean hand covering it.

"Willard Dawset at your service, sir."

Jack took in the pale face, death-like in the swirls of mist. He had to speak loudly over the clatter of the wheel.

"I hear you're quite a card player, Dawset."

The man's cigar angled up, a glowing point in the mist. Jack took tobacco and papers from his pocket with his free left hand. He opened the bag with his teeth, rolled the cigarette deftly with his left hand, making it obvious that he didn't care to leave his gunhandle. And he saw the way Dawset's eyes narrowed.

"I sometimes play cards," the man said.

"A friend of mine said he played with you," Jack replaced the makings in his pocket and took out a match. "An old fellow, he was. About my size. Might say he looked like me." He fingered the

match for a minute, then suddenly scratched the head with his thumbnail, threw the flare up to light his face. "Name of Fred Clint," Jack rasped.

Dawset gripped the rail and his face twitched nervously. For a moment they stared at each other, Jack's gray eyes boring over the match flame, Dawset's eyes flickering nervously, the cigar hanging slack in his mouth. Then Jack sucked in on the quirly, dragged a throat-full of smoke and flipped the match over to the paddlewheel.

"I—I don't know your friend." He stepped away from the rail, as if to leave. Jack blocked his path.

"His body was found two months ago."

Dawset gripped the rail feverishly. He glanced at the great paddles, rising slowly out of the water, cutting viciously back in.

"It would be awful to fall into those paddles, eh, Dawset?"

The man shuddered, and his right hand fidgeted in his coat pocket.

"Take your hand out of your pocket."

Dawset glanced once into the avenger's eyes, once at his bulging pants pocket. A pocket like that was an awkward place to keep a long-barreled sixgun. He looked back at Clint's eyes. Slowly his hand came out of his pocket and rested back on the rail.

"I'm going now. If you want some cards, there'll be some played in 7A. A group of us."

Jack nodded, blew the ashes off his cigarette. "You can go. But only one more thing."

A wave of relief passed over the gambler's face. He pushed away from the rail. "Yes?"

Jack pointed down at the paddlewheel with his cigarette. "There's people aboard after your neck, Dawset. I'm the only one of them that doesn't want you thrown into those paddles. Now get goin'!"

The gambler scurried off. Jack stood

staring after him. He didn't think that Willard Dawset was going to enjoy his ride on the *Emily Emmet*.

HE DRESSED in his only suit, a dark one with a long coat. The sixgun fitted better in the side pocket of the coat than in his work pants. Carefully shaved and washed, he looked more like a passenger than a deck hand. Of course it was against regulations for the crew to go into passengers' quarters. Jack shrugged. The stakes were bigger than a ship's rule.

He had worn the suit to the river front from the ranch, when the news of Fred Clint's murder reached him. He remembered those days, heart-sick and angry enough to kill with his bare hands. And how Bull James made him a place in the deck crew. The two months of looking for the wart-nosed man, expecting every gambler who came aboard to be him. And how, after two months, he had known he couldn't kill the man with his gun nor his hands. He had to be true to his father. And old Fred Clint had sworn that only the law had the right to take a man's life.

He left the crew's quarters, climbed the ladder to the main deck. He went carefully into the passageway that led to 7A. Dawset had a stocky friend named Jim Crug who looked the kind for blackjacks in dark doorways. He sidled along the wall of the companionway, stopped before 7A. He heard the snap of cards within, the murmur of men's voices, and cigar smoke drifted out through the vents. Jack stepped up to the door, put his hand on the knob.

Crug came in a rush from around a corner, fairly flying down the passageway. In the dark Jack could only glimpse the man's stocky form, the raised arm with the pistol in a powerful hand. The man's rush would knock him flat. He couldn't stop it. For a second the man seemed to

hang there, arm cocked to deal a killing blow with the pistol butt.

Jack turned the knob on the door, drove his shoulder against it. It gave, and he burst into the room, one leg still outside.

Crug had no time to shift his charge. He was moving like a stampeding bull. His foot caught Jack's outstretched leg. He stumbled, hit the wall, careened on into the dark.

Jack grinned as he stepped into the room, closing the door after him. Four men looked up from the card table, startled.

"What—what happened?" It was Dawset who spoke.

Jack grinned at him, slid a hand into the roomy pocket of his coat. "Somebody just tried to kill me. Might have been a friend of yours, Dawset."

The gambler's eyes flickered wildly for a second. Then they narrowed.

"Come, now. No joking. We play serious poker in here. Right, gentlemen?"

The other players nodded a bit bewilderedly. They were solid, well-dressed men, puffing fat cigars. Wealthy travelers, Jack thought. Like Fred Clint, you might say. Men with a lot of money to lose. Only Dawset hadn't been able to take the old rancher's cash over a card table. Fred Clint had sat in on too many big games in his long life. Dawset had used other methods, when cards failed.

Jack pulled up a chair with his back to the wall. He hadn't too much money. But he decided to put it all on the table.

"Three hundred in chips."

"Starting a little small," Dawset said around his cigar. He handed out a small pile of chips, slid them over and took Jack's cash.

A fat man next to Jack offered him a cigar. "What's your name, friend? We like to make our games nice and sociable, even if they are for high stakes. My

name's Smither. Raise horses near Taos."

Jack stuck the cigar in his mouth and stared across the table at Dawset. The man was shuffling cards with expert hands, but his thin lips betrayed a tremble as he listened.

"My name's Jack Clint. Might be you've met my dad. Name of Fred Clint."

For a moment the cards stopped. The tremble on Dawset's lips became a twitch.

Jack bit on his cigar and leaned back in his chair. He was satisfied at last that Dawset was his man. But he needed proof. A man like Bull James would be satisfied with the evidence, and throw Dawset to the tender mercies of the paddlewheel. But the law required more.

The fat man named Smithers glanced from one to the other. "What's this about? Something between you two? Forget it now, and let's play some cards."

Dawset dealt with a snap. It seemed to ease his tensed-up nerves. He shot a look at Jack, saw only the open stare of cool gray eyes. He finished dealing, looked up again. Again he received that withering stare. He frowned and concentrated on his cards.

JACK played a couple of hands, absently, hardly seeing the cards. He kept his gaze fixed on Dawset's face. The gambler could no longer meet it. He felt it, though. And his hands were nervous, trembling on the cards.

The tension in the room grew. The door opened and the fat Smithers jumped. It was Crug. The stocky man barged in, glanced once at Jack and stood leaning against the wall, a long cigar protruding from his mouth.

"Oh, the kibitzer again," the fat man said. He stared down at the cards in his pudgy hands. "I don't like kibitzers." he growled.

Crug's face kept its stony, stolid expression. He wasn't interested in what the fat man said. They were just sheep in

for the fleecing; nothing else mattered.

The cigar smoke clouded up to fill the room, mingled with the rank odor of the kerosene lamp. The poker pots began to grow, and with them grew the tension. Jack eyed those around him carefully. It was a quiet spot in the game, a time when men pondered their chances.

"Y'know, this steamer is a floating coffin," Jack murmured.

The fat man jumped. Dawset's face went a shade paler. The rest stared at Clint, lips hanging loose.

"When we dock tomorrow, there'll be a lawman at the dock. A couple of killers are going to be arrested." Jack chuckled, stared hard at Dawset. "Funny how you can ride on a steamer with a pair of murderers and not know it."

The fat man's cigar hung loose. "You know who they are?"

"Yeah." He said it flatly, stared at his cards. "Whose bet?"

"Who are they?" said the fat man.

Jack took his cigar out of his mouth and flicked ashes into the spittoon. He stared at the fat man coldly.

"They killed a man who was carrying a lot of cash. Beat him on the head and threw him overboard. If I said who they were, I might get the same." He pushed to his feet, glanced at the five men in the cabin. "Not my night for poker." He marched straight to the door, stared into Crug's face, and went out the door.

Outside, he hurried down to the deck below. They wouldn't follow for a while, he knew. It would look too bad before the others. It took a minute of searching

before he found Bull James, sitting on a pile of cordwood, smoking his stumpy pipe.

"Where you goin' in that fancy rig, Jack?"

"Been playin' poker. Passenger's quarters. I've got them primed, Bull. They're going to try and kill me. Listen. I'm going to stand at the rail, right in open sight. But you'll be in a passageway nearby. They won't chance a gunshot. Their way is a blackjack or knife. You got a gun?"

The bosun nodded. "But I don't like this. Too risky. I say, why not just heave 'em overboard and be done with it?"

Jack shook his head vigorously. "They're going to hang, Bull. And lawfully. This way we can get them jailed for attack with intent to kill. There are three witnesses in that poker game that heard me say two murderers are aboard. They look like respectable men. Their word should be worth something in court. And once we get Dawset and Crug in jail, we should be able to dig up the rest of the evidence."

"I still don't like it." Bull shrugged his big shoulders. "But it was your dad they killed, Jack. You can call the deal, I guess. I'll go get my gun."

Five minutes later Jack had picked a spot on the afterdeck. He kept away from the paddlewheels, because they made too much noise. A man could sneak up too easily that way. He stood in open moonlight. But behind him, in the dark of the corridor, Bull was well concealed.

He stood there smoking the butt of the

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We are constantly experimenting in an effort to give you the very best reading surface obtainable. For this reason, there may be occasional slight fluctuations in the thickness of this magazine. Now, as in the past, every magazine bearing the Popular Publications seal of quality will continue to have the same number of pages, the same wordage, the same unparalleled value in top-flight reading entertainment that has been and will continue to be our Popular Fiction Group guarantee—the best reading value obtainable anywhere at any price!

cigar the fat man had given him. He glanced down at the water, gliding by in a smooth, silent stream, silver in the moonlight. He touched the Colt in his pocket. It didn't give much confidence. Nothing does, when a man makes killer bait of himself.

He heard the *clack-clack* of the paddles, and then suddenly the tap of heels coming down the narrow deck. Jack stiffened, touched the gun in his pocket once more. A tall figure, walking cautiously approached, a thin cigar in his hand. Moonlight glinted on a pale face. And on a wart protruding from one side of the nose.

"Clint?" The voice probed at him, a tight voice.

"Here."

Dawset stopped a couple of feet from him, leaned one arm on the rail. Both flipped their cigars over the side, with gestures of finality.

For a moment they stared at each other, two tall, lean men who tried to act poised and indifferent. But both were balanced well on their feet, muscles tied up into knots that wanted to break loose.

"You killed my father, Dawset."

"Yes. So I have to kill you."

Jack stiffened. The man made no move. There could be a sleeve gun, or—

AND then the thud came. A dull, crushing thud, down the passageway. Jack spun. Back in the shadows a stocky arm was bringing a heavy object past a man's head. Jack saw Bull James crumple to the deck. He let out a low moan. Crug sapped him again, and James sprawled out full length. Then, out of the corner of his eye, Jack glimpsed Dawset coming. He saw the moonlight glinting off the knife in his hand, and he spun to take the blow.

He caught the man's wrist as it rode down. There was fury behind that blow, the fury of a desperate man. For a sec-

ond he saw Dawset's slitted green eyes, ugly killer's eyes in the moonlight.

The trap had failed! He should have taken Bull's advice. He should have known that two hardened killers would expect a trap. But it was too late now. The knife pricked his chest, and he frantically drove back the arm that held it. Crug was lunging forward, the sap raised over his head. Desperately, Jack grabbed the knife hand with both of his, yanked and twisted. Dawset cursed, but couldn't stop the force that flung him around into the path of his partner. Jack hooked an arm around the man's neck, felt the rail digging into his back.

Crug couldn't stop. He hit them both with a crash, swinging the sap across his partner's head. For a second Jack glimpsed his mouth, hard and cold. He jammed his other arm out, caught the hand with the sap. But Crug had lunged too hard. The weight of the two men against Jack lifted his feet off the deck, forced his spine against the rail. He thought, damn you, if I'm going over, you're going too! Dawset had his leg, was hefting it up, trying to throw him over. Jack helped him, shoved back, still with his arm hooked around the gambler's neck, his hand clamped on Crug's wrist. Suddenly they were a tumbling, whirling mass of arms and legs, crashing over, plunging down toward the water. Dawset screamed. Jack used the last of his breath to bellow out "Man overboard!"

The water hit hard. There was no fight then. They all knew that the paddle-wheel was coming, grinding its way forward. Jack began swimming when he hit the water, felt his clothes and the gun in his pocket drag him down. He heard the *clack-clack* of the wheel coming, plunged away from it. He glimpsed Crug behind. The big man screamed once. "I can't swim!" And then he went down. Jack felt no regret. Crug had escaped the hangman's noose, you might say.

From the deck a voice was calling up to the wheelhouse. "*Man overboard!*" And slowly the paddles stopped.

Jack treaded water frantically, found his clothes still dragging him down. He turned to the right. And there was Dawset, face just showing above the surface of the river.

Dawset grinned. The thin blade of a knife cut the water in front of his face. He paddled with one hand, coming slowly forward.

JACK struggled in his wet clothes. His hand hit the Colt in his pocket. Dawset was almost upon him. He swung the gun out in a long arc, slammed it at the killer's head. Dawset ducked it, came in with knife slashing at Jack's face. Jack swung the gun again, and the knife slashed into his wrist.

He became aware of the silence, then. Of the steamer close, laying dead in the water. Of someone yelling, "Catch this line!"

They turned together. The rope came whirling out, landed short of Jack. Dawset caught the loop, tried to slip it over his body. Jack dove underwater, clawed up at that knife-filled hand. The knife slashed down at him. He pulled to the surface, choking. Dawset was breathing hard, struggling with the rope. He got the loop over his head when the man on deck pulled it. Dawset grabbed the knot. And it slid in his hand.

A slip knot! Then Jack knew. It was one of his knots, noose-shaped, tightening when the rope was pulled. It jerked

once, and the noose was tight around Dawset's neck before he could get it down to his waist. For a moment the gambler was panicked, then he took the strain off by grabbing the rope with his left hand, holding the knife in his right.

Jack watched the men on deck hauling him up taking a turn on a cleat every length of rope. Dawset had shoved the knife in his pocket, hung from the rope by putting his arms up and grabbing the rope above his head. Slowly he went up the ship's side, climbed up astride the rail, the rope still hanging from his neck. And there he stopped, for in front of him was Bull James!

Jack heard their voices. "Killer!" Bull yelled out. And he saw the flash as Dawset's knife was jerked out and slashed at the bosun. Bull ducked, drove a big fist forward. It landed. Dawset tumbled backward, fell over the rail for the second time that night. He fell fifteen feet toward the water. And as he fell, Jack knew what would happen. The rope was cleated down short. He closed his eyes as the gambler's body stopped with a jerk. For a second his hands clawed at the slippery rope. But they could do nothing. . . .

A few minutes later Jack climbed up on the main deck, panting. He was surrounded by passengers, the fat man and the other poker players. Bull had just finished explaining to the captain.

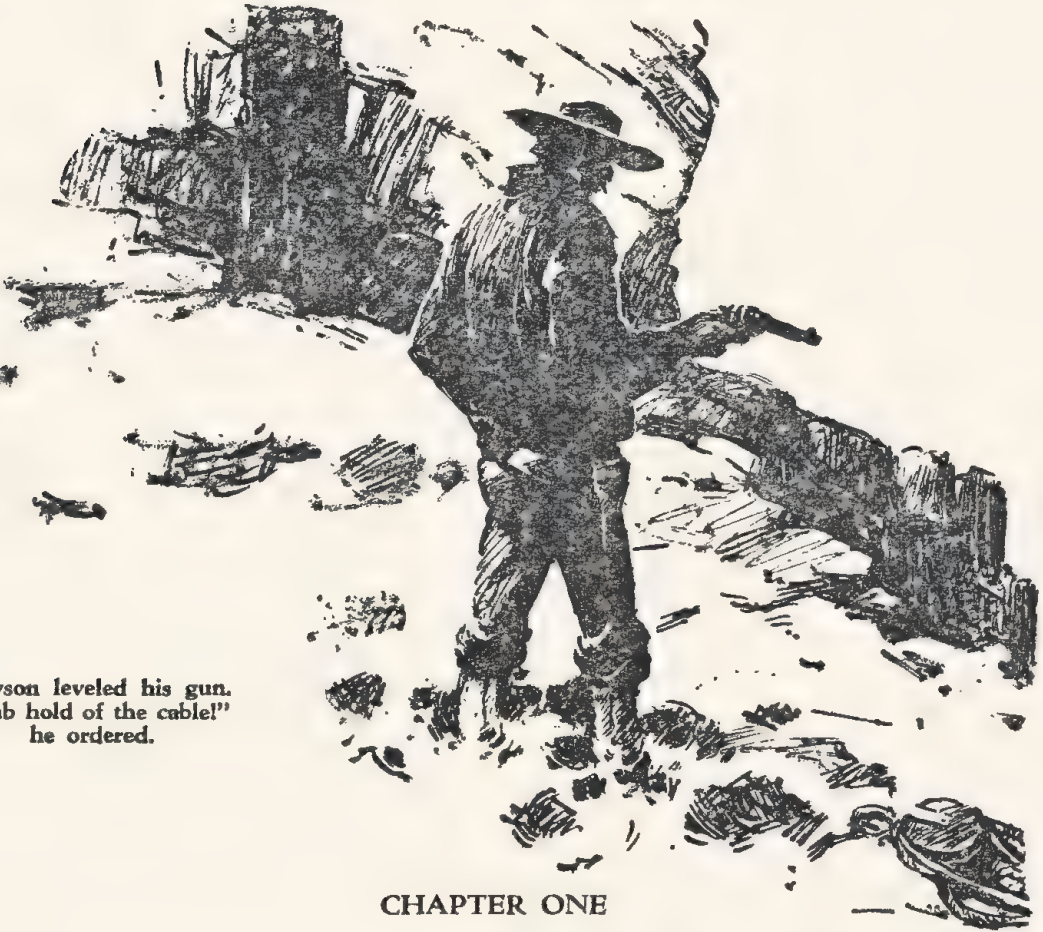
"He hanged," Jack gasped out.

"Like the law says," Bull grinned at him. "Just like the law says. A rope around his neck, and a drop of fifteen feet."



THE NIGHT THAT HELL FROZE

By TOM W. BLACKBURN



Grayson leveled his gun.
"Grab hold of the cable!"
he ordered.

CHAPTER ONE

Dead Man's Gold

SAM GRAYSON rose from his chair, crossed the room, and pulled the hall door open. Apparently the window at the far end of the hall was already open, for the chill night air which moved eternally along the floor of Lundy Canyon touched his cheek as he turned back into the room.

Spencer Manning stirred in the other chair. His colorless eyes peered out sharply from his pink, well-cared-for face.

"Getting warm, Grayson?" he asked.

"Under the collar," Sam said shortly.

"Don't be a fool!" Manning advised with open malice.

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Big Snow Country Novelette

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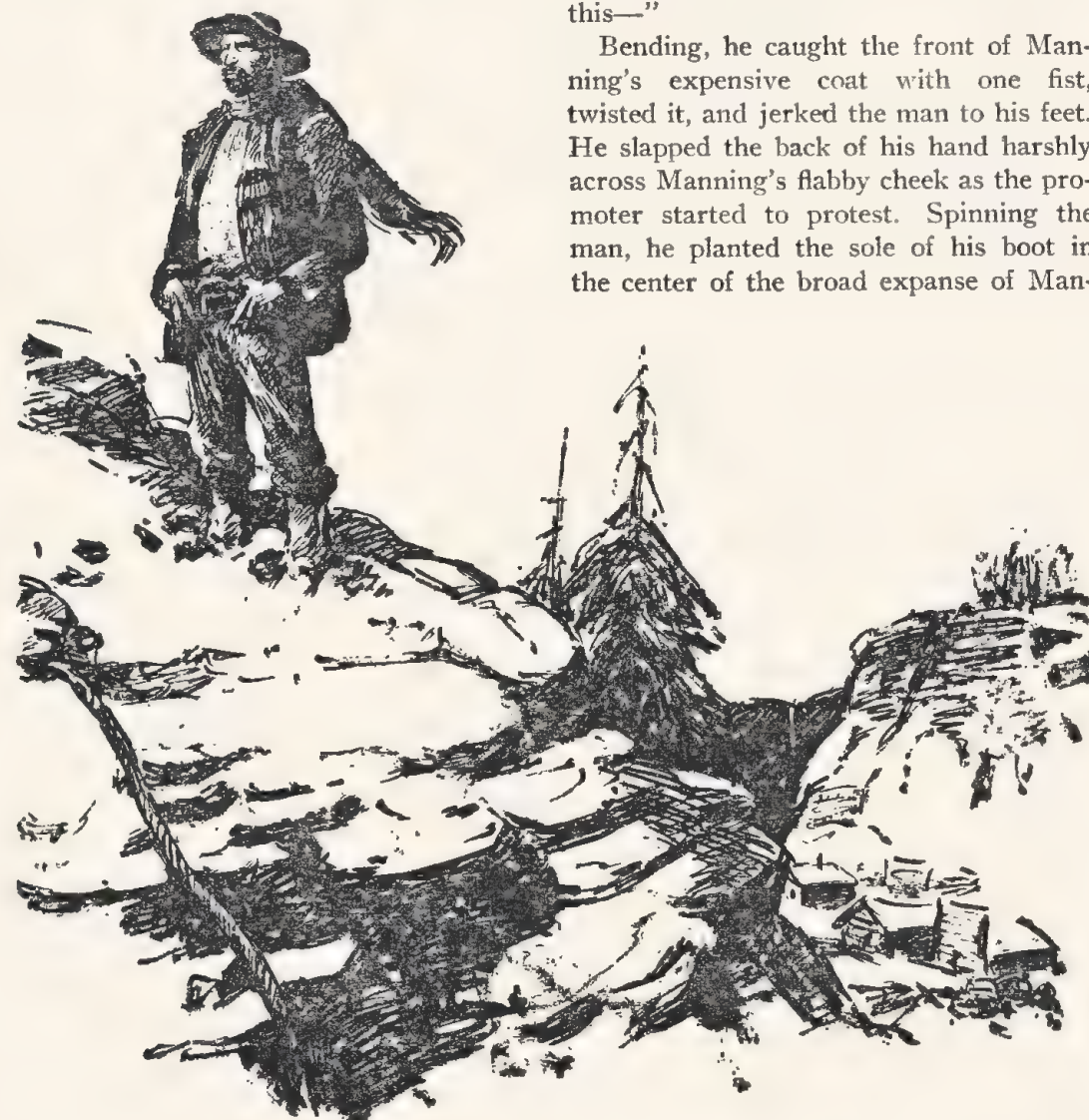
"You're just a hired hand, working for pay you'll never collect. You're just the resident engineer. My deal was made with the stockholders of your Great California Company. I'll buy your fare to San Francisco and pay you a thousand dollar

bonus upon your arrival there to get you out of this canyon. You better take my offer, Grayson. You can't do anything else. Nothing at all."

Grayson looked down at the older man.

"That's where you're wrong, Manning," he said quietly. "I can always do this—"

Bending, he caught the front of Manning's expensive coat with one fist, twisted it, and jerked the man to his feet. He slapped the back of his hand harshly across Manning's flabby cheek as the promoter started to protest. Spinning the man, he planted the sole of his boot in the center of the broad expanse of Man-



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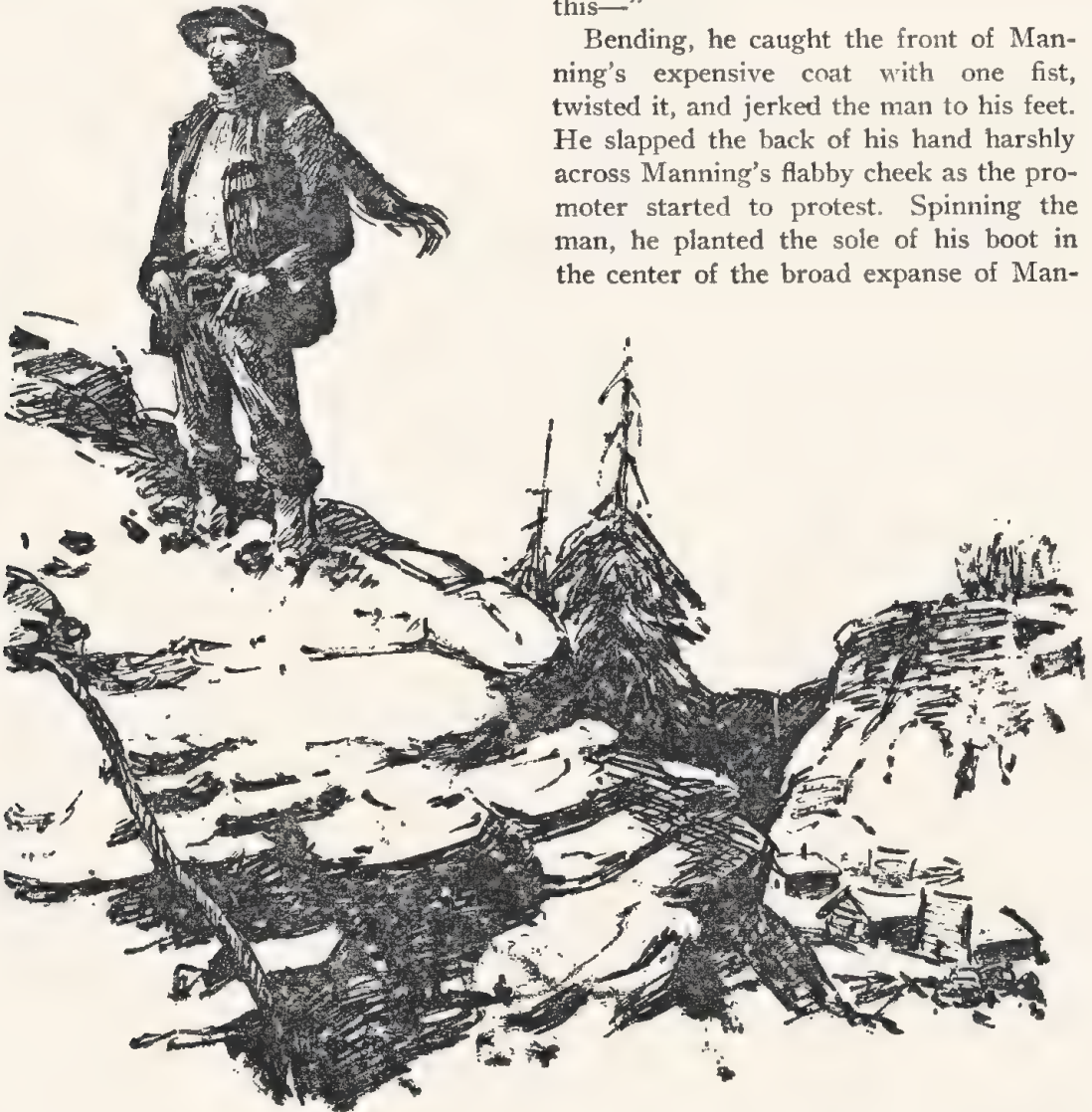
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Bending, he caught the front of Manning's expensive coat with one fist, twisted it, and jerked the man to his feet. He slapped the back of his hand harshly across Manning's flabby cheek as the promoter started to protest. Spinning the man, he planted the sole of his boot in the center of the broad expanse of Man-



ning's breeches and sent him stumbling through the door into the hall. Manning caught himself against the wall of the passage and turned.

"There's a lot of snow on the floor of the canyon this winter, Grayson," he said thinly. "Enough to bury a dead man till spring. Don't forget it!" Straightening his coat, then, Manning walked swiftly down the hall, taking the rear stairs to the ground floor.

Grayson kicked the door closed, fished a pipe from his pocket, and lighted it. When he had drawn on it three or four times his breathing steadied and he sank into a chair. This was not good. Not good at all. This was the way a man committed suicide. This was the way he cut his own throat. From the diggings in Mammoth Canyon to Virginia City, there was no more powerful man along the east face of the Sierra than Spencer Manning. Bodie, Aurora, Virginia, made laws and broke men to suit Manning's whims. The man's power lay in an immense fortune which Manning had built from the grass roots by clever scheming, by opportunism, and by the most savage kind of ruthlessness in any game in which he took a hand. A power so firmly established now that few men in any camp would think it worth while to stand against it, regardless of the potential profit which might result.

Anger was up in Grayson—not wholly directed at Manning. Its heat was turned partially toward himself and partially toward the two men whom the stockholders of the Great California Company had appointed to look after their interests in Lundy Canyon. The Great California was in itself a fabulous thing in a country where fables sprouted behind almost every ridge crest; a property on the crest of the Excelsior summit, which from surface indications, at least, would one day be a bonanza—a tremendously rich ledge of gold and silver in quartz. The claim had been discovered and filed

by old Tioga King in his last season along the high Sierra peaks. That fall, knowing he was dying—knowing that he would not live to see the development of this new discovery carried out—old King had cut it up into an even hundred pieces.

Incorporating the company in San Francisco, he gave the hundred blocks of stock as bequests to those who had befriended him in the past. One hundred men and women scattered through the Sierra camps to whom he felt he owed much. A list of humble and unimportant names, making up the roster of those whom Tioga King had called his good friends.

King's bequest had also stipulated that Sam Grayson be retained as engineer during the development period of the mine. With this stipulation old Tioga had attempted to insure that rich profits would eventually come from the Great California ground to those to whom he had given the stock in the company. Tioga King knew the Sierras and he knew Sierra mining. He knew the Great California would be valueless until mine and mill machinery had been set down on the property and was in operation. He knew that the lifting of tons of machine castings and beds up five thousand feet of sheer mountain face was a big obstacle to the development of the mine. For this reason he had specified Grayson as the engineer to handle it.

With a rich property like the Great California for security, and with a man with Sam Grayson's reputation under contract to the company, Tioga had been sure his legatees would have no difficulty securing financing for development. In this he had been right. But, like Sam himself, the old prospector had not counted upon the lack of business sense in those chosen by the other stockholders to transact the company business. He had not anticipated their doing business with Spencer Manning.

CHEWING heavily on the stem of his pipe, Grayson swore silently at Manning's habitual shrewdness. He had handled the financing of the Great California in a typical manner. Tim Bennett and Nils Larsen, respectively elected president and secretary of the Great California Company by the other stockholders, had gone to San Francisco for financing. Manning had approached them with an offer. A better offer than they could get elsewhere. More money—on his terms.

There were three distinct stages in the development of the Great California property. The first was the purchase of the needed mine and mill equipment and its transportation to the head of Lundy Canyon. The second was the erection of some kind of freight road up the canyon walls to Excelsior summit. The third was the actual installation of the equipment and the development of the workings.

Manning's device had been simple enough. Although the overall total of his loan was generous, he cut it into two pieces, payable at different times. The first, neatly calculated to provide only enough money to buy the equipment and transport it to Lundy Canyon, was paid over to Bennett and Larsen. The second and much larger payment was due only when the mill and mining equipment was set down in its crates on the company property at the summit. And Manning had introduced a time element, specifying that if the equipment was not on the property at a certain date, the second portion of the loan would not be paid and the first portion became immediately due for repayment and the property itself subject to foreclosure.

Wholly unaware of this proviso in the loan agreement, Grayson had been jubilant when Bennett and Larsen came back from San Francisco with word they had secured a loan. Awaiting the arrival of the equipment in Lundy Canyon, Grayson had spent much time running the rough

survey of a grade up the canyon walls with the intention of opening a road in the spring by which the equipment could be freighted in wagons to Excelsior summit.

Then Manning had sprung the double jaws of his trap. There was not enough money left from the first portion of the loan to build a hundred yards of footpath, let alone a wagon road to the top of the range, even if there had been time. And the time limit date set by Manning in secret with Larsen and Bennett was three weeks away. The mine and mill works had to be on the summit in three weeks to meet the provisions of Manning's loan. With Lundy Canyon and its walls mired deep in midwinter snow, Sam Grayson had three weeks to lift forty tons of steel and bulky iron better than four thousand feet almost vertically in the air.

With his anger at Grayson further heated by bitterness at himself for not inquiring further into the details of Manning's loan when it was made, and bitterness at Tim Bennett and Nils Larsen for not giving him the full details in the first place, Grayson presently blew out the lamp in his room and stepped out into the hall of the hotel. There seemed little he could do, but Manning might not have told him all of the details of the transaction with Larsen and Bennett. A talk with them might yet produce a loophole by which the Great California could be saved for those to whom old Tioga King had wished his richest strike to go.

THERE was a bar off of the lobby of Grayson's hotel. Like other such emporiums in the Lundy camps, it was a gathering place for the idle men kept from the workings on the higher slopes by the winter's weather. The hum of many voices rose up the stair well as Grayson approached. It seemed louder than usual, as though some altercation might be going on below. Then one man's voice sepa-

rated from the others and heavy steps sounded on the stair treads. A big man, climbing unsteadily, growling maledictions at those below. The fellow reached the landing at the head of the stairs at the same time Grayson did. He was not a man Grayson remembered seeing in the camps. He was not a miner.

Grayson had an impression of an immensely thick torso, a small head set close to broad shoulders, and huge hands gripping the bannister of the stairs. The man was muttering angrily to himself, rocking his body from side to side, and was apparently very drunk. Giving him plenty of room, Grayson started around him. The fellow clumsily missed a step and lunged into Sam, driving him against the wall. Catching himself, he straightened, glaring angrily.

"You clumsy damned fool!" he snarled. "You trying to knock me down? You trying to roll me down this half-way excuse for a ladder?"

Grayson pushed him firmly away. "Watch yourself, friend," he said.

The man growled again and flung out a huge hand to grip Grayson's arm, cocking his free fist. A drunk could sometimes hit with astonishing force and a full blow from that maul of flesh and sinew could do real damage. Sam twisted in the fellow's grip and drove his forearm in along the line of the man's jaw to check the poised blow. The man began to swear loudly, even for a drunk. The balled fist uncurled and Sam found himself caught in a hoisting bear grip which lifted him from his feet.

Malice was a bright flame in the little eyes close to Grayson's face. He saw over his opponent's shoulder the long drop into the lobby beyond the bannister. With a healthy respect for the giant's strength and his apparent drunkenness, Grayson moved instinctively. Doubling both knees up sharply and using the man's grip about his shoulders as a purchase, he drove his

knees into the fellow's belly. The man grunted, solidly hurt and shaken, but he retained his grip, still swinging Grayson toward the bannister.

In a surge of desperation, Sam slammed his right hand and then his left full into the man's face. These almost simultaneous blows twisted the man's head to one side and back in a wrenching movement which lifted him in a backward arch onto his toes, breaking his grip on Grayson. The stair railing caught the fellow across the small of his back, making a fulcrum on which his body pivoted. His feet swung upward, narrowly missing Grayson's face, and his heavy body plummeted over the rail into the lobby below.

HE LAY motionless where he had fallen. Sam hurried on down the stairs, straightening his coat, and bent over the man. The clerk and two or three others who were also in the lobby gathered. More men came out of the bar. One of these looked accusingly at Sam.

"Just a drunk, brother," he said. "He's been raising hell down here for ten minutes, but we got him to move along. You didn't have to be so rough with him."

"He tried to drop me over the railing," Grayson said quietly.

The clerk, who had been kneeling beside the man, straightened at this.

"He sure did," he agreed. "I saw that. It would have been a nasty accident for you, Mr. Grayson."

Sam shook his head. "There was nothing accidental about this, believe me!"

The clerk prodded the man on the floor with his toe.

"He's dead," the clerk said. "A newcomer. Never saw him before. What do we do with him, now?"

"Plant him," Sam suggested bluntly. "Plant him and send the bill to Spencer Manning."

The clerk paled. "He worked for Manning?" he asked sharply.

Sam nodded. "I think so. Can't think of anybody else in Lundy Canyon who'd like to see me out of the way, and Manning told me I was going to have to move or stay here permanently."

The clerk backed a little away. "When a Manning man dies in this canyon," he said, "somebody has to answer a lot of questions."

"I'll be around," Sam murmured. He chafed the barked knuckles on one fist with the palm of his other hand. With a nod to the clerk, he turned away and walked rapidly to the street door.

He fully understood, now. This was the way Manning would work. Little things, casual things, accidents. And any of them lethal—if they were carried out. A man facing that kind of thing would have trouble sleeping. He would have trouble moving from one place to another. He would grow jumpy at shadows. And after a little, even if he avoided Manning's accidents, he would get to a point where he could stand no more. There was a limit to the sand and the nerve in any man, and Manning would crowd an enemy until he reached that limit.

CHAPTER TWO

The Big Snow

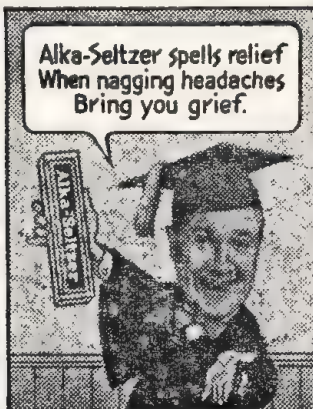
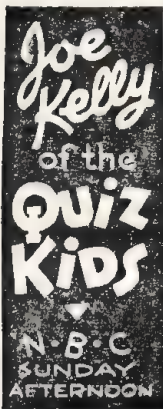
SNOW had been pretty well shoveled from the street of the camp, but it was piled high against the exposed sides

of the buildings and on the vacant lots between them. And although it was three hours after sunset and the town itself was not well lighted, there was a glow equivalent to moonlight in the reflection from the tall, white-shrouded peaks standing on three sides of the canyon. The wind, moving gently along the canyon floor, was bitterly cold.

Midway along the main block of the camp, Grayson became aware of a peculiar, shuddering feeling which increased in intensity for a couple of moments, then faded away. He had not been in Lundy Canyon long, but he knew what this thing was.

It was four thousand feet from the floor of the canyon to the summit of Mount Snowden on the south, and the top of Black Mountain on the north and the airline distance between the summits of the two peaks was not over three and a half miles, with the canyon lying between them. As a consequence, the canyon walls were virtually perpendicular. This was a slide he had heard—or felt, rather, and these slides were the curse of Lundy Canyon.

Reaching the end of the camp's main block, Sam kicked the snow from his boots and turned into the shabby little office of the Great California Company. Tim Bennett and Nils Larsen were in the rear room, feet up on the fenders of a cherry-red stove. The two officers elected by



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their fellow stockholders in the Great California Company had glum faces. The floor about them was littered with papers. They swung their heads in unison toward him as Sam entered. Tim Bennett frowned.

"Manning's been to see you, too, eh, Sam?" he asked. Grayson nodded.

"There's only two bigger fools in this canyon than Sam Grayson," he said.

Nils Larsen's huge head hunched down between his shoulders. "Yah, Sam," he agreed. "We don't have to guess who they are. Tim and me."

"The time—" Sam said. "Why did you let him set that time limit? That's the thing that breaks our picks."

"It was a printed contract with blank spaces in it," Larsen said. "I guess Tim and me didn't read it too good. Seeing that Manning was also handling the buying of the equipment we needed through a broker friend of his, we thought that January first date was the deadline for delivery of our stuff here—a protection put into writing for us."

"You never told me Manning had a hand in buying the equipment, too!"

"We couldn't," Bennett said. "Manning had us believing he was doing us a big favor—fixing us up with a fat loan, buying equipment at a short price, rigging everything for us. The thing was, this broker was supposed to be under-selling everybody else as a favor to Manning, so Nils and me had to agree not to let out how we'd got the stuff. We had to agree to act like we'd done the buying direct. Seemed reasonable in San Francisco, although Nils and me can both see the damned foolishness of it, now. Maybe it was just that Nils has been a teamster all his life and I know more about the business end of a single-jack in a tunnel facing than any other kind of business. We was in water over our heads and didn't know it."

"Just how much of the cash Manning

loaned to you was left after he bought that equipment and had it shipped up here, then?" Sam asked sharply. "We better get all the heads we've got together on this if we're going to wiggle out of this tight."

Bennett spread his hands and nodded at the invoices on the floor.

"We're about done wiggling, Sam," he said heavily. "Manning brought these up to us tonight when we hit camp. The charges for the stuff he bought to our account and the freight on it, set down here. I've got something over a hundred dollars in the drawer of a desk out front. That's all there is left. We've had to hand all the rest back to Manning. Prices had gone up, he said, by the time his broker got to work on our orders. And freight from San Francisco to Lundy Canyon runs high."

LARSEN swore heavily. "Instead of buying close for us, Sam, that dirty son made himself a fat commission on our equipment. And from the freight charges, he must have had our shipment routed over every rail and wagon road and freight line in the state that he's got an interest in, or that he could get a rebate from. We've been picked cleaner than a hound's tooth. No payroll money. No cash to open up a road to the summit, even if we had the time. And the way it is, no matter from what angle you look, in about three weeks Spence Manning is going to hold title to the Great California—before we've had a chance to work even a pound of ore!"

Sam Grayson nodded. "It looks that way," he agreed. "Manning bought exactly the kind of equipment he figured he could use when he took the property over, himself. That's sure. So the stuff lying in its crates at the head of the canyon now is good. If it was on the summit, we might be moving rock in three weeks. And if we were moving rock by New Year's Day, we'd have Manning over a

barrel. He'd have to come through with the balance of the loan he promised you, then."

"Sure," Tim Bennett said sourly. "And that second payment was nice and long-term, without any strings attached. We'd be sitting pretty. Only thing is, on New Year's Day we'll be sitting here like we are right now, calling Manning every name we can set tongue to or maybe trying to drown our luck with a bottle. We can't do anything else."

Grayson had been leaning far forward, staring at the floor, thinking. He straightened. "We could try something else," he said. "Manning figured to make his time provision expire in midwinter, so we really couldn't do anything. But if we could turn the winter to our account and use it against him—"

Bennett's eyes brightened. "You got something in mind?" he asked sharply.

Grayson nodded slowly. "A thin chance," he said. "Something with risk in it for all of us. Manning won't stand still and watch us. That's certain. He proved that to me tonight. But maybe worth taking a shot at, if you boys will back me."

"It was our bull that jammed the whole thing, Sam," Nils said earnestly. "We got a duty to the rest of the bunch Tioga gave the stock to. Tim and me have got to do something. You name it."

"All right," Grayson said. "Listen close, then—"

SAM GRAYSON came back to the Lundy Camp hotel a little after noon. He was tired, hungry, drenched with sweat and the inevitable slosh of working in the deep snow. Spencer Manning was idling in the hotel lobby, reading a four day old San Francisco newspaper. He folded this up and followed Grayson into the dining room, calmly pulling out a chair at Grayson's table.

"Understand you had a little trouble

here at the hotel after I left you last night, Sam," he said with a mockingly pleasant smile. "No hard feelings, eh?"

Sam nodded. "A little trouble," he agreed. "No hard feelings, Manning."

The promoter smiled again. "That's good," he said. "These little accidents can happen to anybody, any time—any time at all, Grayson."

Sam nodded and gave a waitress his order. Manning had commenced paring at his nails with a gold penknife dangling from a heavy chain across his vest.

"The last thing I would have said about Sam Grayson if anybody had asked me is that he's a crazy man," he murmured. "But after the reports I've been getting this morning, I'm going to have to change my mind about that. When a man's dead, he ought to lay down. Digging that pile of freight for the Great California out from under the snow isn't going to do any good, Grayson. You know that. Every load there is too heavy for even a pack mule. And between them, Bennett and Nils Larsen haven't got enough money to hire a three-legged burro, let alone a pack train. And if you had a pack train, there isn't a trail for them. That stuff is going to lie right where it is till spring—till I can get a road built. And then it will go up to the top on wagons. It would be easier to knock the Sierra down flat than it would be to get that freight to the Great California claim in three weeks."

It was Sam's turn to smile. "Then maybe I'll have to flatten the Sierra," he said.

"My offer still holds, Grayson. Your fare to San Francisco and a thousand dollar bonus when you get there."

Sam's smile widened. "Which is the same as saying that maybe it's impossible to get the Great California property into operation in the time I have, but as far as you're concerned, there's a thousand dollars worth of possibility it might be done. Otherwise, you'd have closed your

offer last night, not repeated it today."

Manning stood up abruptly. "One thing is sure as hell," he growled. "You and Larsen and Bennett can't move that stuff single-handed and if you think getting pack animals is a tough thing in these camps, try getting labor to help you—when you haven't got cash for a payroll. I own these camps and damned near every man in them. The word is out. You couldn't scare up a big enough crew here to serve as pallbearers at your own funeral."

Sam pushed back a little in his chair. "You go shake a stick at somebody else, Manning," he said flatly. "My disposition goes all to hell when there's a bad smell around me at mealtime."

Manning shrugged. "I guess there's truth in the old saw that a stubborn man is brother to a crazy one, Grayson," he said. "Go ahead. Have your fun. But take good care of that machinery. I've got use for it in the spring."

The man turned and walked away from the table. Sam turned to the meal set before him without the appetite he had brought into the hotel.

A NUMBER of idle men along the walk grinned mockingly at Grayson as he left the hotel and started back up through the camp, but there was no apparent hostility in them, although Sam was aware that this group was one measure of Spencer Manning's strength—the teeth in the promoter's statement that the Great California could hire no help here, even if there was money in the treasury to meet a payroll.

At the head of the canyon, a quarter of a mile or more from the last of the buildings and perhaps five or six hundred feet out from the base of the cliff, Bennett and Larsen were still laboring with shovels, peeling back an overlay of snow from the piled freight consigned to the Great California. Grayson frowned when he saw

that the two men were alone. Bennett stuck his shovel in a bank of snow and approached him.

"It's no use, Sam," he said heavily. "There's a dozen good carpenters in the camps here, but not a one of them would turn to, even for the hundred iron men I had to offer. It's you and Nils and me and nobody else."

Grayson shrugged. "All right," he said. "You and Nils get to work on the cases that the cables and winches are in. Break out one winch and set it up here. Anchor it to those trees. Get a couple of spools of cable laid out—a light one, first, then a heavy one. Give me the stoutest double-fall block we've got. Then you and Nils get to work with hammer and saw. Use the oak out of those crates to make some sledges. Stout ones—stout as you can manage. Use the widest stuff you've got for skids. Brace them up solidly.

"About three sledges should handle it. Load everything onto them. Shift the heavy stuff over with pry-poles to get it loaded. Lash everything down tight and link the three sledges together with short lengths of cable."

Bennett tipped his head back to look at the stand of cliffs towering over them. He shook his head slowly.

"Sam," he said, "It won't work. There's deadfalls and snags and bad broken-rock slides under that snow. And we've got forty tons of dead weight to handle. Three men can't do it. Maybe if that sticky snow was gone off of the slopes and we had iron on the skids of the sledges, we'd have a chance, but not the way it is."

"It must have been a long time since you were a kid, Tim," Grayson said. "The snow is our only chance. It's filled the crevices and covered the deadfalls and broken rock. We can't build a wagon road, but maybe we can use the snow in its place. That's what I'm figuring on.

It's the one chance we have left us."

Nils Larsen grinned suddenly. "I remember when I was a boy in the old country, they built fishing boats on top of a cliff above the fiord. In the summertime, that is. They were a long way from the water, and there was no road. Then would come the winter, the snow and the cold. Sleds would be made and the boat would be slipped down the mountain. When the thaw came, there she would be, ready to float and fit. Sam, maybe we can do it. If Manning's men will leave us alone, maybe we can do it!"

IN HALF an hour Grayson was well up onto the cliff face. Larsen and Tim Bennett, laboring below, were pigmies. The sound of their hammering as they worked with the packing crate lumber rose clearly in the thin air. Sam paused on a ledge to regain his breath. The double-fall block he was carrying had grown increasingly heavy and the light pilot cable he was dragging behind him became more and more of a burden as it unreeled from the spool where Larsen and Bennett were working.

The climb was a tricky one. Grayson knew from pilot trips over the cliff face in search of a suitable route for a freight road how to take advantage of slanting ledges and breaks in the face. However, the heavy snow overlay made any movement dangerous. There was no possible

way for a man to tell when a sheet of snow was soundly anchored or when it was but barely fastened to the rock beneath it. Grayson was acutely aware that at any moment he might start one of the canyon's dreaded slides, plummeting tons of loose snow and rubble downward upon Larsen and Bennett beneath, burying the equipment till spring.

He was faced with the additional problem of making a fresh survey as he moved. A survey this time not designed to carry a wagon road, with its gradual ascending grade, but to locate the smoothest and most direct route by which the sledges might be dragged up the steep slopes. Once or twice in the first few minutes of his climb, Sam had been tempted to turn back, half-sold that the thing he was attempting was actually impossible, as Tim Bennett had claimed.

But he kept thinking of the hundred little men and women to whom old Tioga King had tried to give fortunes. He kept thinking of Spencer Manning's sureness; of the injustices the men had already worked; of the tremendous power he would become along the whole Sierra if he ever secured title to the riches Tioga King swore were here. Because of them, Sam knew he had to go on.

RESTED after a little, Grayson began to climb again. He had already negotiated the first violent pitch of the can-



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yon wall and moved back along a recessed bench to tackle a second rise. Cresting this, he took another brief breather and stared at the third and final pitch. As he looked upward, a small flurry of snow slipped down the face from above him. A man appeared there, working down over an exposed talus of rock. Grayson waited for him, eyes narrowed.

He had not watched above him, his attention chiefly on the light cable trailing behind, making certain it lay straight and did not become fouled. No man but Larsen and Bennett and himself had any business up here on Excelsior Summit at this time of year.

The fellow came down the talus and swaggered toward Sam, grinning insolently.

"You look hot, Grayson," he said as he approached.

"You got business with me?" Grayson asked sharply.

The man shook his head with a quick, wide grin. "Not especially," he said. "The boss just wanted me to keep an eye on you to be sure what you're doing. He wanted me to work along up here with you so that if there was an accident or something, I could bring him word. The boss is interested in you, Grayson. You know that."

"Yes, I know," Sam agreed drily.

The Manning man eyed the pilot cable trailing behind Sam. He shook his head.

"That's some idea you're working on, Grayson," he said, a touch of admiration in his voice. "Not many men would think of it, let alone have the guts to try. Maybe you're right. Maybe a sledge would run up across these slopes while the snows are packed on them—if it didn't shake something loose and start a slide. Maybe three or four men below, pulling with a good hand-winch, might be enough power to move the loads. Too bad you're crossed up with the boss. Personally, I'd like to see if it would work."

"Keep out of my way and you'll have a chance," Grayson told him shortly. "You can look all you want. It won't bother me."

The man shook his head again. "I'll keep out of your way, all right. But I won't see anything. If you don't slip and fall up here, if you get your lines strung through your blocks and all set to haul, you don't think Spence Manning will let one spoke of that capstan winch down there turn, do you? Why don't you quit before you risk your neck uselessly any further?"

"Manning told you to ask me that?" Sam suggested with a quiet, deceptive mildness.

"He sure did," the man agreed. "I had a hell of a time climbing fast enough to overtake you."

Grayson turned partially away, and swung immediately back, with a pistol in his hand which he had jerked from his belt. He shoved it at the man, aiming at his heart.

"Since your boss has been so damned thoughtful to send me a spare pair of shoulders, I'm going to use them. Get hold of that cable. Let's get on up this cliff."

The Manning man looked at Sam and then at the gun for a moment, and grinned ruefully.

"Bill Bolin would be a damned fool if he didn't admit he had stuck his head into something when the jaws close on him," he said wryly. "You sure turn a table on a man! Handle that gun easy, Grayson. I'll hug your cable without any argument. If I'm going to quarrel with an armed man, it's going to be on level ground—not in the middle of a slanted white hell, half-way to heaven! It's sure enough your deal, Grayson."

Grayson passed the end of the cable to Bill Bolin and started the man up the slope, walking in his tracks with the gun ready in his hand.

CHAPTER THREE

White Fury

THE floor of Lundy Canyon was in deep shadow when Grayson and Bill Bolin finally reached Excelsior Summit. The Manning man hunched on an outcropping, getting his breath after the last long pull, while Grayson took the fall-block he had been carrying and started toward a group of trees on the lip of the cliff. Bolin raised his head and called after him.

"Wait a minute, Grayson. That block's going to have a hell of a strain on it. There isn't enough topsoil on this damned rock for those trees to be really anchored. I don't think they'll hold. How about a crevice somewhere in solid rock where we can wedge the fall? It'll make a better anchor."

Grayson blinked at the man's suggestion, but it was sound advice. Bolin rose and climbed over a heavy ledge of granite just above him. He called from this in a moment or so. "Take a look at this and see what you think."

Sam crawled up to where the man crouched. Riven into the solid granite was a large fissure which widened at one point into quite a little pocket, sufficiently large to contain the double-fall, and the fissure leading out from it to the face of the cliff was in perfect line with the direction in which the trailing pilot cable lay. Grayson nodded satisfaction. Bolin helped him ram the fall into the crevice, anchoring it with repeated blows with a large rock which wedged it firmly in, the direction of pull being such that it could not work out.

Going below the outcropping, Grayson passed up the end of the pilot cable. Bolin threaded it through the fall and anchored its free end to the loop provided on the tackle for that purpose. Grayson took the lower segment of the fall and swung

his weight against it. The line began to run through. Bolin scrambled back out on the ledge and joined him.

"That's a real anchor," he said with satisfaction. "We can hang ourselves onto the lower half of this block and pay ourselves back down the mountain. In the morning we can fasten a real, man-sized hoisting cable on and haul it up and thread it. When that's reeved, we'll be ready to go, Grayson. We'll see whether your freight will come up the wall or not. By hell, I think maybe it might—"

The man broke off suddenly, realization of his position hitting him. He laughed without humor. "By hell, I'm as crazy as Spence Manning thinks you are, Grayson!" he said. "I forgot which side I was working on!" The man paused again. He touched Grayson's arm. "Look, can I talk to you?"

Sam nodded.

"I'm going to tell you how I got into this," Bolin said. "I'm a hardrock man with plenty of shaft experience. Manning promised to make me a shift-boss when he opened the Great California if I'd string along with him. That's why I did. It's my only reason, and I'd sure listen to a bid from the other side of the fence, Grayson. I think I like the people over here better."

Grayson shook his head. "I can't make any promises. I'm just a hired hand, Bolin. But there's better jobs than just shift-boss coming up when the Great California goes into production. And if the people I work for thought they owed a man something, they'd pay him off pretty handsomely. What he got would be how much he earned."

Bolin scrubbed his hand thoughtfully along the line of his jaw. Finally he straightened. "Well, I'm changing sides. Not because I think the job's better. I don't. Not because I think you'll ever lift a rock on the Great California claim, because I doubt like hell you'll do that.

But I got to see how this rig of yours for getting that freight up the mountain works."

Grayson handed the man a short piece of line leading from the lower portion of the double fall. "Let's start paying out line and get back down to the valley floor. We've got work to do tonight and tomorrow's going to be a big day."

BENNETT and Nils Larsen viewed Bill Bolin with hard eyes when he returned to camp with Grayson. However, the man's willingness to pitch in on the tasks at hand was so apparent that their hostility soon ended. The Great California force was further augmented by the appearance of a new recruit a couple of hours after sunset in the person of Muley Brown, an old prospecting comrade of Tioga King's and one of the hundred stockholders in the company King's last testament had organized. Bad weather driving him out of the hills above Bodie, Brown had crossed the Mono Basin to see how work on the company property was progressing. He turned out to be a handy man with axe and saw, and between his arrival and midnight he managed to correct the worst of the weaknesses in the three sledges Bennett and Larsen had built up out of packing crates.

The concerted efforts of the four working about the pile of Great California freight managed to get the machinery loaded on the ledges and lashed in place and the sledges lashed together. Leaving Muley Brown with Larsen and Bennett to work the capstan bars on the hand winch at the foot of the cliff, Grayson and Bill Bolin lashed themselves to the block and were walked up the cliff face by means of the light line and the winch, operated by their comrades below. They carried with them the end of a heavy hoisting cable which unspooled as they rose up the wall.

Dawn came as they were reeving this

heavier line through the falls in the place of the light pilot line. Fastening the pilot line to the foot of the fall blocks, they signaled the three men below and the block was hauled back down the face of the cliff. While this was in progress Bolin spotted another company working up the canyon wall. He grunted sourly, "Here comes trouble, Sam!"

Grayson studied the other group. He identified Spencer Manning in it. Manning's party reached the rim about a quarter of a mile north of the head of the hoist Grayson and Bolin had rigged. The group paused here, fanning out over an area of two or three hundred yards. However, Manning and two others headed toward the place the fall block was anchored. They reached this about the time Bennett signaled from below that the block was fast to the sledges and that he was ready to start taking in line on the winch. Manning apparently saw and interpreted the signals. He called sharply to Grayson.

"Hold up there a minute! Before you move I've got to talk to you—"

Grayson momentarily withheld his answering signal. Manning approached him.

"Those buildings in that camp down there belong to me or to friends of mine," the man growled. "If you start this damned fool try of dragging that stuff up here on skids, you'll shake the snow loose and send a slide down as sure as hell. I'm not letting you do it!"

"Tell it straight, Manning," Bill Bolin said. "What you mean is you're afraid those skids will work all right, that you'll lose your shot at the claim up here. You're trying to talk your own scare as though it belonged to the whole camp. It won't go! Give the signal, Sam; tell Tim to start hauling."

"I warned you, Grayson!" Manning snapped.

"Sure. And you tried to scare me at

the hotel the other night, too. Get out of our way. We're busy!"

He turned his head, raising both hands high above his body in a double sweeping arc. Bennett and Larsen and Muley Brown promptly started marching around the capstan windlass on the valley floor. Presently the cable reeved through the blocks came tight and began to sing with its tension, inching over the pulleys and turning them on their bearings. Manning watched in silence for a moment, then withdrew.

MOMENTS later, Sam saw the three linked sledges, piled high with their heavy freight, begin to move slowly against the base of the cliff, the gap between them and the winch widening. They came against the first pitch of the wall and walked up it, inching their way. Grayson swung gleefully toward Bolin. As he did so, Bolin swore sharply. Grayson raised his eyes and saw Bolin was looking toward Manning's men on the rim. As he swung in this direction he felt again the thing he had felt on the streets of the camp below, two nights before. The heavy, shuddering feeling which came from snow moving with an increasing speed across rough granite facing.

Bare rock was exposed just below the position Manning's men had taken. A strip of gray stone which widened as he watched with rising anger.

"This finishes us!" Bolin said. "The dirty sons have started a slide right over the winch!"

Grayson watched the white tide turn gray as it scoured up rubble from the rock over which it rushed. Far below, Bennett and Larsen and Muley Brown had halted their milling circle about the winch to stare upward. Grayson swore at their slowness, then breathed deep relief as they began to run.

There was something awesome in the

slide, in the way it shook the air and the very mountain on which Sam Grayson stood. It struck a shelf and plunged out into open air, falling free. It seemed that its outward plunge had carried it so far it must certainly strike the huddled shacks and buildings of the camp, far out from the base of the cliff and that even if they had wings the running men could not clear it. Abstractedly Sam saw that the upward moving sledges had not slipped back when the winch stopped turning; that they had apparently wedged themselves where they were. But this did not seem important.

The slide seemed an interminable time falling. Then it struck the valley floor, surprisingly close to the base of the cliff down which it had cascaded, and the three running men below were safe. A great explosion of snow and ice flung up and settled slowly. The air no longer shook on the mountain. Sam saw that the winch was buried deep. Only the first of the sledges pointed up the slope nosed out of the rubbish heap of the slide. He shook himself, turning to stare angrily across at the line of Manning's men. Bill Bolin touched his arm in commiseration.

"Anyhow, we tried," he murmured.

Grayson's eyes moved away from Manning's bunch and touched a shallow ravine slanting down a little to one side of the line of his cable. It was full of snow, glazed smoothly over. A large, rounded boulder sat near its head. And the day before, on the way up, Sam had seen an unusual amount of water trickled out of the lower edge of the snow blanket there. As much of an indication as a man could ever find of a failure of the bond between snow and the stone under it. He spoke quietly to Bolin. "You got a hatchet in your belt. Get to work on that cable. There's no tension on it now. Cut it and reeve out the lower section of the fall. We'll rig it one-to-one. Give me plenty of slack on the free end. I want to make

a harness around that big rock there—”

Bolin stared. “You go out there on that sheet and she may go while you’re on it!” he protested. “Make sense, Grayson. Kicking a slide won’t get your freight up here.”

GRAYSON made a sharp gesture. The man worked down the slope, slipped the cable across a stone, and chopped at the steel strands with his hatchet. In moments he had it frayed through. Grayson took the free end and a short length of light line and headed out across the snow filling the ravine.

“Get a pry-pole and come out here,” he called back to Bolin. The man hesitated for a moment, then disappeared in a small lodgepole stand. Sam wrestled the heavy hoisting cable about the huge boulder he had chosen, looping it in a cradle and making his knots fast with the lighter line. He was nearly finished when Bolin came up with a stout pole. Grayson took it from him.

“Get up to the head of the ravine, now, and kick the hell out of the snow there. Try to ball some and roll it.”

“Manning’s getting curious, Grayson,” Bolin said quietly. “You haven’t got all morning.”

Sam glanced at the rim. Manning and his men were moving hurriedly along it toward him. He jammed the pry-pole under the big bolder and swung his weight against it. The huge stone did not move. He shifted the pole to a new position and tried again. This, also, brought no movement. Manning’s men were close enough for him to hear their voices. Sweat was running into his eyes. Suddenly a shout sounded above him. He looked up to see a great white mass bounding toward him. Startled for a moment, he didn’t understand.

Bolin shouted again. Sam started clawing his way back across the snow-filled ravine, then. The man above had

gotton a huge ball into motion. He heard other shouting and saw that Manning’s men, short-cutting toward him, were on the slope just below the ledge where he and Bolin had anchored their fall-block.

Suddenly, sounding like it was practically on his heels, there was a heavy cushioned impact which flung out a cloud of powdered snow. Bolin’s stuff from above had struck the boulder imbedded in the ravine squarely. Rolling where he was sprawled, Grayson peered through the flying stuff. The huge rock had shifted under the impact. It stood now tilted at a different angle. For a moment Sam thought it was not moving, that it would not move farther. Then he saw its top arching slowly outward and downward.

It was a painfully slow, deliberate thing. The rock turned once. Sam breathed relief when he saw that his harness about it would not slip. It turned again with gathering speed, shaking the snow as it rolled across it, and the snow itself began to move lazily. The hoisting cable rising from below to pass over one sheave in the block and lead back to the moving rock jerked tight. Grayson distinctly heard the angry, singing sound it made under this punishment. But it held. Far below there was a startled shout. The three sledges slid out from under the edge of the fall. Spencer Manning and his men had dumped into the valley.

As the big rock gathered speed, so did the sledges in their opposite uphill race. They rocked wildly, but did not overturn on the rough going. And the cable continued to hold. Sam watched them with a detached fascination. They came up over the three stages in the rise of the canyon walls with a tremendously accelerating rush. Somewhere above, Bolin called warning again. Sam turned, then realized the warning was not for him. Manning’s bunch was just under the singing cable and a little below the ledge

(Continued on page 130)

Fangs of the Wildling Buccaneer

Neither the claws and fangs of all the marshland killers, nor the slow, deadly threat of famine, nor yet the murderous steel jaws of the man-creature's traps could stay black Chag from the wild glory of his savage heritage!

CHAG, the big male mink, clacked his teeth sharply and growled deep in his white-splashed throat. He had come writhing up along the flat bank, through willow and dogwood thickets like a snake, bound for the covert in which old Nitch, the hen partridge, had nested.

Chag struck savagely. . . .



By
HAROLD
F.
CRUICKSHANK

There was a tang of musk in the morning dew-laden air—not the musk of his kind, but that of a big, long-tailed weasel. Chag had bided his time. With great wisdom he had allowed Nitch, the partridge, to lay and set, while he fished at the riffles, or found his food in other quarters. Old Nitch always hatched a big brood of chicks and although she gallantly defended them with her buffeting wings and sharply striking beak, Chag took his toll each season.

His dark eyes now flashed as the weasel tang became stronger. He flicked his mouth with his tongue. Saliva dribbled from his jaws as he scented blood, the warm, freshly tapped blood of young birds—*his* birds, for this was *his* home range!

A frenzied chattering and flapping of wings issued from the covert as Chag leaped in, but the big weasel was lightning fast. A hatchling in his jaws he whipped about and streaked for the cover of tangled windfall timber.

Chag was engaged beating off an attack by the mother bird, and so his hated enemy, Scree, the big weasel, got clear away.

Scree had wrought havoc at the covert. Five limp hatchlings lay on the ground. Chattering, the hen partridge continued to strike at the dark snake-like creature which writhed about the thicket with fiendish grace.

Suddenly her wing shoulders found their target. Chag was toppled in a rolling ball when in the act of seizing a dead hatchling. Nitch caught him in his recovery and her beak struck sharply, striking him in the left eye.

He shrieked, a fiendish screech which rang along the creek flat, sending young creatures of the woods scuttling to cover—field mice, young muskrats, all of which knew that when Chag screeched, it was danger time.

But despite his injury, Chag flashed his lithe form and sank his fangs into a hatchling, whirling clear when the partridge hen again attacked. He whipped from the

covert, throatting his curses as severe pain assailed him.

Now down in safety, he tore with savage ferocity at the hatchling. He tapped through the brain and sucked, guttering in pleasure as he fed on his favorite food.

When every last vestige of the young chick was cleared down his eager gullet, he whirled and champed his savage jaws. His injured eye batted and gleamed as it dripped its tears.

Chag's eyes had been keen. He would suffer impaired vision for some time, and this was dangerous, for, while he was king of his home range, there were creatures bigger than Chag, distant cousins, among which was the old pine marten, in the nearby woods which flanked the creek flats. There was also in these woods one of Chag's fiercest and most ruthless enemies, Ah-hoo, the great horned owl. With an important sense impaired, every moment of his life from now on, Chag would have to be on the alert. A single lapse, or moment of carelessness could bring sudden death. . . .

He clacked his jaws as his hatred of the big weasel mounted to a state of fury in his bitter brain. Turning, he deposited musk, a sharp warning to Scree, the weasel, then still chattering his curses, he slid on through the thicket, to a favorite hide-out cave where he curled to close and rest his damaged eyeball. Soon, his sides heaving sharply, Chag slept, and while he slept his short ears twitched sharply and his nose wrinkled. Chag, the wise one, was alert even though he slept.

THE spring season moved swiftly into summer. In the sharp sunlight of this early morning, Chag blinked, for the strong sunlight hurt his wounded eye. He had taken to the water more than ever since his injury, for he found surcease from the pain as he dived into the deep pool made by the beavers when they dammed the creek. But here in the beaver

waters danger lurked. Old Ahmisk, the king beaver, whose young were just stirring, was ever on the watch for marauders. Ahmisk, who weighed close to seventy-five pounds, whose incisors were terrible weapons, was capable of destroying many of the larger, more deadly predators, including Hee-chee, the lynx. Thus, as he fished, Chag was ready in a flash to dart to safety if ever he tanged the scent of the beavers, or whenever a tell-tale ripple in the water gave its warning that Ahmisk, or one of his kindred was near by. . . .

Chag's sides grew gaunt. More than once the beavers had caught up with him, just as he was about to reap the fruits of a stealthy hunt for fish.

Today, Chag swam across the big pool, making his way upstream to the shallows where pike and suckers were still running.

He was about to slink into the shallow water when suddenly he froze, his fur bristling, for his keen nose had brought him one of the most dreaded of all scents—that of a man creature.

Lurking in the cover of an alder thicket on the far bank, a young man, a homesteader, watched the dark brown form on the opposite flat bank. At his homestead yard, Dan Daily had constructed a wire cage. He had gotten literature on mink raising, a new venture. But he could not afford to send for captivity-raised breeder stock. There was such stock here, and his eyes widened as he caught the beauty and conformation of Chag, whose tracks he had so often seen.

Wisely the man backed off. He had the wind in his favor now and from more distant cover he waited patiently until at last he saw the dark, slender form enter the water, suddenly to flash forward with his jaws clamped over the back of a silvery fish.

The man expelled a long breath as he saw the mink's head raise. In his jaws was a fish half his own weight, yet with great power Chag turned and swam to the bank.

He laid the now limp fish down, circled it a few times as he struck his nose forward in sharp darting motion, testing for danger sign.

Satisfied that all was clear, he began his feast, and Dan Daly gasped at the ferocity with which Chag attacked the fresh flesh of the young pike.

"Must be plenty hungry and must like fish a heap," Daly told himself, and a slow smile gathered up his mouth corners. It was a smile of satisfaction, for he had at last found Chag's fishing waters. Already he began to look to the future, envisioning success with his mink-raising project. Everything would be in his favor, for here in the wilds of the creek zone there was every kind of food Chag and his kind enjoyed and thrived on. . . .

Daly moved off, back to his hinterland home yard, there to sort out his traps and to lay his plans. He knew the mink was wily, wary and would be difficult to trap, but Dan Daly was an expert trapper. Chag, he knew, loved a diet of fish, and at once Daly set about concocting a bait with a fish base, touched up with scented oils. . . .

He was smiling as he strode across his yard, where his young wife's hens scuttled squawking from his path. Chag and his kind had paid the yard more than one visit, but so far had escaped the steel traps, though weasels, whose intelligence was not as high as the mink's, were trapped from time to time.

As he passed by his newly-built mink cages, Daly stroked one and his smile widened. Whistling, he moved on to the squat log shack to tell his wife of sighting the big male mink. She would be glad, for such predators had already taken a sharp toll of her poultry. . . .

A sound of rolling thunder arrested Daly at his stoop. He turned to scan the north-westerly sky—ominously black. He frowned, for heavy rain now would hamper his haying.

A LONG the creek bank, his belly filled, Chag cocked his head at the sound of thunder. He clacked his jaws and growled thickly. Heavy rains would swell the creek, deepening the water at the riffles, and so curtail his fishing.

When a jagged bolt of lightning hit a deadwood tamarac glade nearby, Chag rose to his hind paws, and chattered, then turning, he scurried back along the creek bank to seek the haven of a small cave. . . .

The violent storm brought rain which lasted for three days, filling the creek to the rim of its flat banks. Gone was the nightly music at the riffles and with its passing went Chag's chances for successful fishing. Again hunger assailed him and he padded along at his customary swift pace, roaming far from his home range area. He moved like a dark shadow about the lake's sedges, pushing himself with serpentine grace into the shallow water at the marshland.

Out 'on the main lake old Moakwa, the loon sentinel, gave out his eerie, ghostly wails which shattered the silence of the wilderness night. Chag's back muscles rippled. Instinctively he recalled a night when old Moakwa had attacked him. Moakwa of the terrible spear-like bill, which could impale and kill at a single thrust. Wisely, Chag gave the loon a wide berth.

Suddenly his nose wrinkled, and his short ears flicked as he scented ducks, and heard the deep-throated call of a mallard drake. Guided by his keen nose he moved on until suddenly he made a shallow dive and swam under water.

Batting his wounded eye, he searched for his quarry and now, barely paddling, he veered gently in, then with a lightning-like thrust of his neck, his jaws snapped, teeth closing on a well-grown mallard.

The mallard hen quacked raucously as she sounded the alarm. A nearby green-head drake sounded off, and younglings scuttered across the water. Soon the entire lake area was a bedlam of sound. All the

feathered ones were aroused, and a big Canada honker lent his voice to the banshee-like wails of old Moakwa. . . .

Chag paid no heed. His prey clutched firmly in his strong jaws, he swam until his pads touched the solid tufts of marsh grass. Soon he had shaken the water off his coat and was tearing, ripping, sucking in one of the greatest feasts he had enjoyed in many days. . . .

Chag had, however, touched off a sharp alarm, alerting all the waterfowl. No longer did the ducks and grebes rest in the marsh land at night, but took their broods out to the tule beds in center of the lake, or off the points.

The big mink was thus forced to find other hunting grounds, and always as he roamed through the thickets, or along the creek flats, he snarled as he caught the ever-present musk tang of Scree, the weasel chieftain. Every now and then Chag hunted for his rival, but always Scree evaded him.

Occasionally, Chag froze in his tracks at the dread scent of the man creature, but he began to realize that associated with the man scent was a tang of fish. Thus it was, the mink began to haunt the man trails—always alert, but always as strongly attracted by the seductive scents.

Hot weather came and the creek level sank. The riffles again displayed their leaping silver in the moonlight nights and Chag resumed his fishing, but the spawning run was over and save for a few fingerling suckers, Chag's expeditions brought him little success.

A full moon drenched the wild tonight as he sifted along the right bank of the stream. He caught many scents, including the tang of Hee-chee, the lynx, but there was no immediate danger in Hee-chee's scent tonight. The lynx tom was bent on his own hunt trails.

As he approached the first of his fishing riffles, Chag saw a young sucker sporting himself in the moonlight.

Silently, Chag swam from the shore line, and then crouched on the gravel bar. A sharply fragrant scent attracted him. He cocked his head to catch the full tang of this aroma, then moved on, mincing across the riffle bar, attracted to the left bank of the stream, where the scent was strongest.

Chag fluffed out his fur. He was drooling saliva as he crept stealthily forward. On a stick, protruding from the bank over the riffles was the bait, a fish head. Chag minced a few steps forward. Only his pads were now in the water when he suddenly struck forward. . . .

The steel jaws of the trap closed sharply on his offside rear paw, bringing the big mink toppling down. In a flash he whirled, to begin his fight for freedom. His fiendish screeches carried far along the creek valley.

HIGH in the fork of a tamarac, old Ah-hoo, the great horned owl heard. He gave out his own blood-chilling hunting call as he took off on silent wings.

In a dense covert, Scree, the big weasel, listened. He then clacked his jaws and glided forward. . . .

Chag was in distress. Again and again his screeches penetrated the wilds. They reached as far as the hewn log footbridge which the man creature used to cross the creek.

Dan Daly spun on the log, almost losing his balance. "Mink!" he exclaimed. His pulses began to run wild. He had many traps set out along the creek flat, hoping to catch a female as well. But his chief thought was of Chag, the big male.

He hurried to the bank and began to weave his way through the thickets, slapping at hordes of black flies and mosquitoes. Guided by the wild cries, he moved steadily along toward the beaver dam, toward the favorite fishing riffles of his most coveted quarry. He was sure now that the big male mink was trapped, and a glow of exultation flashed through his body.

At the trap, Chag continued to leap, coil, stretch and roll as he put all his power into his efforts to free his paw. Soon, in desperation, he would begin gnawing, gnawing through his paw.

Suddenly he froze. To his keen ears there came a stirring in the nearby thicket. He wrinkled his nose, sniffing sharply, but the wind was against him. Instinctively he knew that some stealthy creature crept toward him. It was Scree, the big weasel, who stole in. Not for a moment would Scree challenge his big dark cousin to open battle, but here was a chance to rid the range of Chag, his most hated enemy.

The weasel crept nearer, belly down, through the grass. Suddenly he leaped. Chag spun to strike but the jaws of the steel trap held him securely. Scree whipped to one side and struck again. His fangs seized, but Chag coiled and his terrible teeth struck with deadly accuracy on the right forepaw of his enemy. Chag's powerful jaws were exerting full pressure when suddenly out of the sky, plummeted the big owl.

Simultaneously mink and weasel broke their holds. Shrieking, Scree, whirled and streaked for cover. Chag stretched and snapped, his teeth closing on a couple of feathers as Ah-hoo rose swiftly out of danger. The big owl began circling. His eyes gleamed as he closed his wings to strike. But all at once he gasped and spread his wings, flapping swiftly, for the heavy tread of a man creature's footsteps sounded. Chag spun in his trap. He batted his bad eye as he glimpsed the man looming before him, then turned and gave out his nauseous stench as he writhed and stretched in a terrific effort to free himself.

Dan Daly stood by, watching through wide eyes. Never in all his trapping experience had he seen such wild fury. Then he turned, cut a forked stick from a willow bush and satisfied with his weapon, he came in. Chag stretched to attack, but the

man thrust the willow fork at him. With great speed and accurate timing Chag dodged that deadly fork until at last it struck him in the nape of the neck. He continued to fight, but was pinned down against the ground until he could no longer struggle.

As he felt the human fingers touch him he attempted to squirm around and use his fangs, but to no avail. Shortly, a cord about his neck, he was secured in dense blackness from which there was no escape. Chag was sacked and being carried along.

It was not long before the big male mink was free again, but when he ran, he crashed into an obstacle he had never encountered before. He could see through its mesh, but could not penetrate it. When he slashed at it with his fangs, he was hurt by its hardness.

Throughout the night, Chag limped back and forth, screeching as he searched for some way out of his cage. At last exhausted, he sank to rest, to lick and suck at his damaged paw.

With the coming of daylight, he was startled by the sight of two man creatures just outside his compound. Again the man caught him with that stick. He was unable to put up any form of attack. Shortly, he felt the bite of something stinging his wounded paw. But soon he was free, and when he licked at his paw he snuffled and spat.

CHAG'S paw recovered. He had scarcely any limp at all after a couple of weeks. Twice the man creatures had come, held him down, and treated the foot. His eye condition, too, was better. For some time he had refused the food brought to him, sipping only some water now and then. But now he ate and smacked his lips and guttered in pleasure at the taste of the food.

Chag grew stronger, but throughout the nights he roamed over his compound, searching for some weak point. Now

and then he settled in a corner, under his bed straw, to begin chewing, tearing with his strong teeth. . . .

Tonight he was padding back and forth in his cage when suddenly he froze, rearing his head to sniff sharply. He clacked his jaws and growled, for on the night air, close in, was the musky tang of Scree. The big weasel was here at the home yard of the man creatures. . . .

Now and then Chag caught the flash and gleam of his enemy's sharp eyes. He hurled himself at the wire walls of his cage in a mad desire to get out and attack. . . .

Then came the loud, raucous squawks of chickens at their run. Death struck sharply. A door slammed. Chag could see the big form of the man creature moving across the yard. There was a terrific sound of thunder and a flash of flame. . . .

But Chag knew that Scree was not hurt. Scree, at the crash of gunfire, had whipped clear. He ran in close to the mink compound, a young hatchling in his jaws. . . .

One dawn Chag was startled from a deep sleep by the wild cries of one of his kind. He whirled and rushed to the end of his cage. He sniffed sharply, and made chattering sounds, for in another cage, whose end was only a foot from his, crouched a sleek young female mink.

When she ceased her screeching, Chag called her. She rushed to the end of her cage, and raised herself to her full height, sniffing sharply, giving out piteous whimpering sounds. . . .

The summer pushed into autumn. Chag grew more restless. He turned every now and then to sniff sharply in the direction of the creek where the fall run of fish would be on. He tangled the musk of beavers and other free creatures, but always the strong scent of the man creatures was prevalent.

They came to the edge of his cage, making voice sounds which disturbed him. He peeled back his lips, exposing his terrible teeth, but they did him no harm. Daily

there was fresh food for him. His coat was sleeking up to its prime, and in all the wilds there was no handsomer mink than Chag—a rich, almost black, color now. . . .

From time to time he was aroused by the scent of Scree. The weasel's coat had whitened to its rich ermine, with beautiful black-tipped tail.

Then came the first snows and the noisy departure of all the ducks, geese and grebes from the nearby lake. Chag listened, blinked up through the light snow into the wedges of their flights. Soon there were no more sounds, save the wails of the coyotes, heralding the approach of winter.

Chag became more settled as heavier snow fell on the hinterland. He burrowed under the warm straw in his bed cage and resumed his chewing of the floor planks. . . .

When the winter had whistled and howled for its first three months, Chag found the second cage with its female occupant placed close to his. He could almost touch noses with the young female. She clawed at him, screeching.

Today, Chag was startled by the approach of the man and his wife. All night, he had been making advances to the neighboring young mink, and he had worked himself into a mad passion. As the man creatures approached, he whirled about to attack them, snarling.

Dan Daly smiled broadly and turned to nod to his wife. "We'll have to be careful, honey," he said softly. "I think I'll change my plan. Instead of putting him into her cage, we'll reverse it. I'll take the forked willow and stand him off, while you snip the wire of both cage ends, and make the runway. Think you can manage? The little female is plenty scared anyhow."

Nan Daly nodded. She had on heavy mittens, with a special outer sheepskin covering, in case of attack.

It was not long before Chag was freed. The man creatures stepped back, and Chag stirred himself as he realized that

he was no longer alone in his cage. He whirled, leaped. He felt the prick of sharp fangs on his neck. . . .

At the stoop of their shack, the Dalys smiled and withdrew.

WHEN the female mink took herself to the seclusion of a far corner of the cage where a special box had been arranged for her, Chag fought furiously as he continued his nightly scraping, chewing of his bed box flooring.

A warm chinook wind fanned the wilds. Soon Chag could hear the drip of water from the eaves of the shack and other buildings.

It incited him to a greater fury of desire to be free, and though his jaws ached, he increased his endeavors, until at last a gaping hole appeared through the floor planks.

He turned now, his eyes flashing. He called softly to the female, his mate. He ran toward her, but she snarled. As yet she was without understanding, but Chag continued to signal and at last she stirred, stretching her sinuous neck. She moved forward. He chattered sounds of encouragement.

Shortly, he had squirmed himself down through the aperture his strong teeth had made. The female followed. They were free!

Chag led off, whimpering softly. Shortly he halted, raising a forepaw. In the creek flat thickets were other mink tracks, and soon the tracks of Chag and his mate were lost with these. . . .

Chag moved on, weaving, writhing, stopping every now and then to wait for his mate.

Shortly, he had found for her a den, an old otter cave in the creek bank. Under an overhang of clay, now uncovered, was a patch of dry grass . . . grass which the female began to pluck for her nest.

Chag felt the pangs of hunger—sharp pangs which gave him a boldness. His

mate whimpered in her hunger, too.

Chag sniffed sharply into wind. He caught the scent of the creatures at the yard of the man and cringed at the man scent blended with them. Suddenly a sharpening puff of wind brought him the tang of Scree. The big weasel was running toward the homestead yard.

Chag coiled himself. He champed his jaws, then stretched into a sharp run across the sloppy snow on the frozen creek. . . .

THE big mink came to a sharp halt close to the squat building from which came the sharp sounds of stirring roosters. He heard the cackle of the hens. Dawn was breaking.

Chag whirled around the base logs of the chicken shack until he came to an aperture in the mud chinking. Here the scent of Scree was strong. It charged Chag with a furious desire for battle. He thrust his nose through the hole, then squirmed on inside, as a wild flapping of wings and squawks sounded. . . .

Scree whirled from his grim task of execution. Blood dripped with the saliva from his jaws as he glared into the gleaming eyes of the mink. He gave out a high-pitched cry, bunched himself to leap, but Chag was more swift.

Scree's fangs slashed. They found a hold, but the heavier Chag bore him down. Together they rolled, chattering their battle sounds of pent-up hatred. Scree's fangs drove deeper through Chag's hide, but they only served to stir the very last once of Chag's hatred and power. He suddenly coiled himself and his head darted forward.

Scree's lithe, snake-like body writhed. He slashed out with his claws, whipped from side to side, but suddenly his body relaxed. He slumped. Chag drew back his head and struck again and again at that lacerated throat before at last he spun.

The heavy clump of man's footsteps startled him. He scurried to a far corner and burrowed under a pile of straw litter, panting sharply.

Dan Daly swore bitterly as he surveyed the damage wrought by the big weasel. But suddenly his eyes widened. He moved in, dropped to a knee as he glimpsed the badly mangled form of the white killer lying stretched on the littered floor.

He rose now and turned, moving outside to call to his wife. Chag heard him moving around the end of the shack. It was Chag's moment for escape.

He ran swiftly, softly to the door's log sill and peered out, sniffing sharply. There was no immediate danger. Suddenly he whirled, snatched at a small hen. Using all his power, he dragged the limp creature over the sill and on around the building. As the man's footbeats sounded, Chag moved on through a fringe of willow.

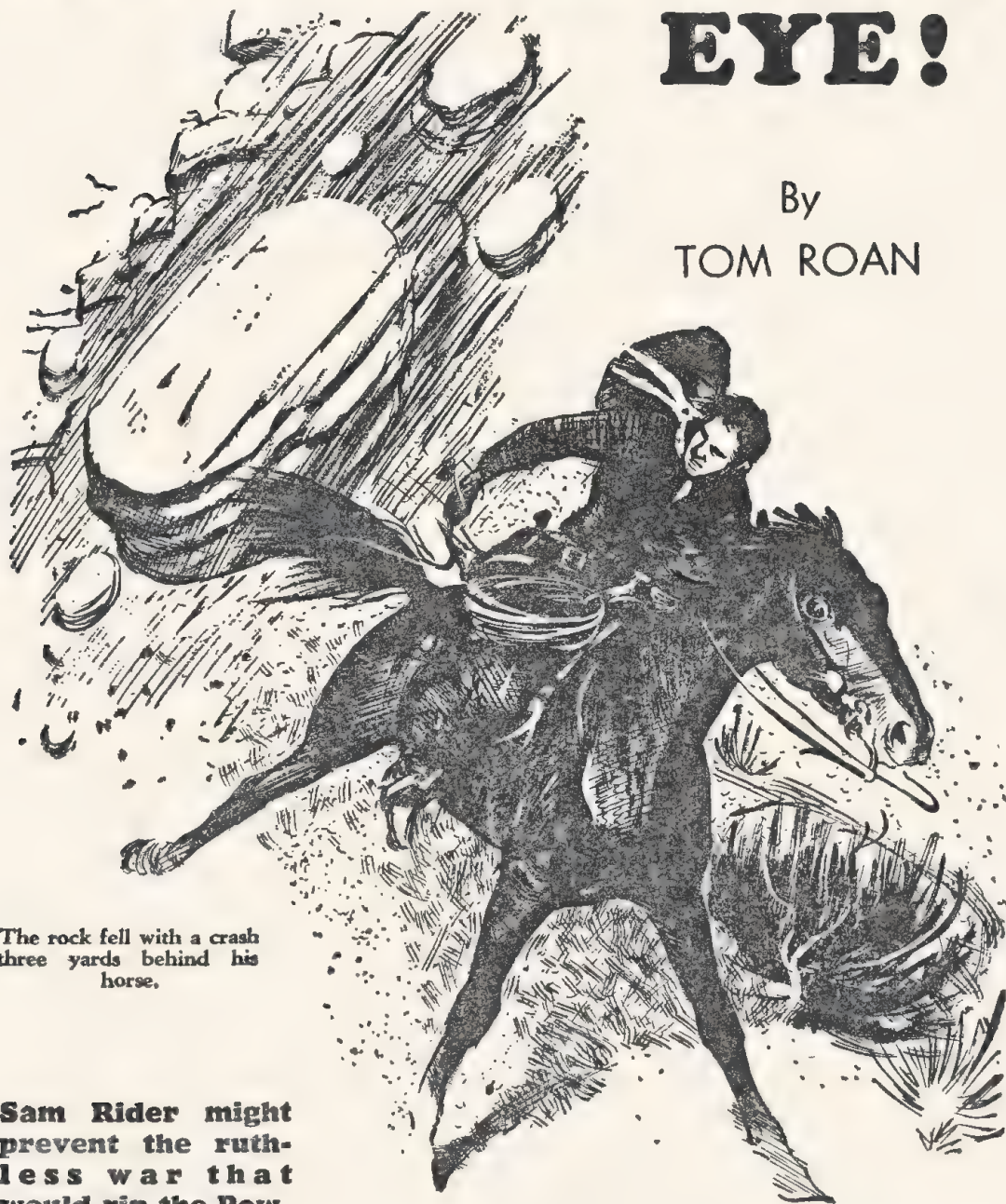
Within an hour, struggling, Chag at last dropped the hen just outside his mate's cave, but first his fangs went to work. He feasted with great appetite and only when his belly hollows were filled, did he rise, chattering, to move off, leaving the remains of his kill for his mate. . . . He would not return to her.

Chag was a lone wanderer and now he sifted along the creek bank, skirting the beaver dam, until he found an old den close to the first of his favorite fishing riffles. Shortly the grouse would be nesting in the thickets; soon would come the music of the fast water over the riffle shallows, and then the flash of running suckers and pike. . . .

Chag blinked up into the sunlight. He yawned, and stretched his limbs by turns, then, muttering throatily, he turned to enter the small cave under a slab of rock, there to curl himself in peace and contentment, while the warm sun and flowing spring wind went swiftly to work on the snow and ice. . . .

SPIT IN DEATH'S EYE!

By
TOM ROAN



The rock fell with a crash
three yards behind his
horse.

Sam Rider might prevent the ruthless war that would rip the Powder River range to bloody pieces if he brought both sides to hear him augur . . . with a renegade lawman carrying a hangnoose—knotted and ready for Sam Rider's neck!

THE heat was terrific and had been hanging on hotter than fury for weeks, the drought drying up the land, no let-up except at night—the worst spell of hot weather many old-timers claimed that they had ever seen in the

northern Wyoming cow-country. Right now the sun blazed straight overhead, burning down through the foliage of the huge old cottonwoods and willows along the bank of the river.

Two tall chestnut sorrels plodded listlessly along the river, jets of dust squirting behind their heels, then slowly settling back as the horses followed a north fork of the old Oregon Trail stretching up the Powder River into the bloody and lawless Indian Country of Montana.

Talk between the two riders had ceased long before, the old man in shabby gray and bullhide chaps to the right keeping his head down. It was too hot to talk for old Ben Laredo. The taller, and far younger Sam Rider could see no sense to talk either. After all, he had known Ben for most of his twenty-seven years, and each knew everything there was to know about the other.

Sam Rider was more alert, noticing now that they seemed close to the end of the drought-stricken regions. The little grass behind them had been wilted, curling over and turning to brown dust within a few yards of the river. Now it was spreading back and back, and the base of the tall hills ahead showed green here and there—a sign that there might be work somewhere for two good cowhands.

Rider was still studying the hills when they rounded a gradual bend and saw the town ahead. That, he nodded to himself, would be Medicine Butte, once the meeting ground for the Cheyennes, the Sioux, Tongues, Crows, and all the others who had put up a losing fight to keep their best hunting grounds free of white settlers.

Medicine Butte would be tough. They had heard plenty of talk like that as far south as Antelope Crossing, now nearly sixty miles behind them. But they had seen tough places before. Old Ben had probably seen the toughest of them in the days when he had been a plainsman,

Indian scout, buffalo hunter, trapper and trader ranging as far north as the headwaters of the Missouri. But it never occurred to them that they were already being watched and studied through a powerful pair of glasses on the upper porch of the jail on the west side of the street just above the two-story red-brick bank.

Watching quietly when they struck the foot of the street, looking at the false-fronted stores and squat houses, they swung to the left in front of an imposing two-story of peeled logs and stone. There was no signboard over the bright-red swinging doors, but this would be the Oregon Trail Hotel they had heard so much about. As they swung down at the long hitchrack each noticed the huge man in a wide white hat and pale-tan whips, coming toward them, pinkish mustaches carefully trimmed, a gold star shining on the left side of his red and white-checked vest, a silvered and engraved Colt rocking at either hip. By the time they were stamping their dusty boots on the sidewalk and slapping dust from the brims of their hats against their chapped legs, the man was reaching them, looking them up and down with small, pinkish eyes.

"Hi-yah!" he grunted. "Little hot for tall ridin', ain't it?"

"Plenty—and dry!" Sam Rider answered him with the usual smile. "But sometimes it has to be done if you want to get some place."

"The Montana line, maybe? Quite a few in the past, a lot of late, have gone through here like that. An'," he added with a sigh, "some have come down the other way, rakin' 'er hard for the Wyomin' line. Some didn't get too far either way from Medicine Butte. I'm Carl Zoe, the sheriff. Got to check on men passin' up an' down of late."

"Shoot the wor-~~ks~~!" ordered Rider with a grin. "You won't find any strings tied on us behind!"

BEN LAREDO looked the sheriff up and down, drawing himself into a straight figure and hitching up the worn silver buckles of his broad belts. "He's Sam Rider, fella I've knowed most of his life. I'm Ben Laredo. Left Texas early in the spring, been workin' our way up an' up, when an' where we could find a job. Lookin' for jobs now, an' fellas down the river said they might be had in these parts. We stopped last night at the stage coach relay station thirty mile' down the river. The night before we was in the Owl Hotel in Antelope Crossin'."

"Yeah?" The sheriff's tone was hardening when he noticed a little group of men beginning to form in front of the Oregon Trail to listen to the conversation. "Sounds all right so far—*maybe*. Yuh fellas now," the pinkish eyes narrowed, "wouldn't know anything about a man down the river called Ace Hanlon—'fore or after he was killed?"

"After, yeah!" nodded Old Ben. "Heard a name like that last night in the relay station. Gun fight, a fella said."

"Gun-fight, hell!" snarled the sheriff. "A man ain't in a fight when he's shot with a high-powered rifle, like, maybe, one of them kind each of yuh fellas have on yore saddles. But no matter for now. Yuh fellas stay close around. Don't start thinkin' of leaving town until I've talked some more with yuh."

He walked straight on, giving neither

Laredo nor Rider a chance to answer him, the men in front of the Oregon Trail suspiciously glancing at each other. Slapping more dust from his hat Rider led the way on across the sidewalk, pushing open the red swinging doors with Laredo following.

Blinking rapidly to get their eyes used to the shadows after the bright, hot sunlight outside, they saw a big, ruddy-faced man in a white coat behind the bar.

"A couple of bottles of beer—real cold!" ordered Rider. "We were told that you serve meals here."

"None better from New Orleans to the Arctic Circle!" grinned the bartender, standing up the beer and two glasses as he nodded toward an archway across a hardwood strip of dance floor. "Walk in an' he'p yoreself at one of them tables. Six bits at this time of the day. Dollar at night for all yuh can hold. Public stables, if yuh want 'em, just above the jailhouse. Strangers, I take it?"

"Was, but not now." Ben Laredo reached for his bottle and a glass. "Yore sheriff met us just out front. For some reason, he don't seem to like our looks a hell of a lot. Somebody, it seems, got killed 'round here."

"Who, for instance?" The bartender put his big hands flat on the drain trough. "Frenchy LaMonte an' Pardeau, Rodin Buckstead, Blue Nose Bill Harper an' his young Charley, some five or nine others—

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or maybe Ace Hanlon, the latest down the river?"

"Hanlon," said the old man. "High-power rifle ball in the back or somethin' like that, he said."

"They all seem to die with high-powers crackin' in the distance, but—but, of course, I wouldn't know!" The bartender turned quickly back to the cash drawer with a silver dollar Rider had laid on the bar. I'm just Reed Turner, half-owner in this dump. I stay here, see nothin', hear nothin', say nothin'—an' know a damn sight less. Yuh stay well an' on yore feet longer these days. Beer was fifty cents." He flapped the half-dollar change down. "Make yoreselves to home."

Used to the shadows now, they could see eleven men in a quiet line at the other end of the bar. None of them looked like toughs, but each man was heavily armed. Suddenly a big, square-jawed man in brown, his hair white, was stepping back from the others and moving toward them, a long Colt rocking from either hip, well-filled cartridge belts around his rather fat middle.

"Yuh fellas, now," he cleared his throat gently, "would yuh be lookin' for jobs, seein' as how yuh look like yuh might *sabe* cows?"

"*Sabe* 'em we do," nodded Ben Laredo. "But just what kind of a job? Belt or plains cows an' tall ridin'?"

"A clean job with a clean outfit!" snapped the man. "I'm Cross Cassidy of the Circle-C twelve miles north of town. This is Milt Miller," he jabbed a thumb at a tall, lean old man behind him. "Forty years now the cowboss of the outfit. Pay's sixty, seventy if things get worse. Good grub!"

"Wait until the sheriff gets through with us!" Rider grinned, now looking him up and down, deciding at once that this big Cross Cassidy was not a man who would be hard to like at once. "We were

told to not leave town until he's had a talk with us."

"I heard yuh say Carl Zoe didn't like your looks." Cross Cassidy grinned from ear to ear. "I wouldn't hire any man he did like! Seventy's the pay instead of sixty. When'n hell will I call yuh dudes?"

In the past I've been called nigh all the names writ on them," Ben Laredo pointed to the many bottles and brands of whiskey on the back bar. "But it's Ben Laredo, an' my pard's called Sam Rider, real home in Texas. Neither one of us carry a damn thing to hide from Mr. Zoe or anybody else!"

"Then she's a deal!" Cassidy thrust out a big hand to Laredo. "We eat an' ride. Saw yuh come in. One of the boys will see that your horses are fed at the stables. If Carl Zoe don't like it he can go to hell!"

"Or, by Gawd," intoned a voice down the bar, "have 'em both shot in the back somewhere out on the range."

OLD Milt Miller and four of the others at the lower end of the bar trailed them as Cross Cassidy led the way into the Oregon Trail's long dining room. The last man went outside to take care of the horses. After an abundant meal they were ready to go. When they were coming out of the public stables Carl Zoe and a tall, long-necked deputy in shiny black were there to meet them, the sheriff stepping in front of the horses and lifting his hand.

"I told them two to not leave town 'til I said so, Cross!"

"Yeah?" Cross Cassidy pulled up and looked at him with a leer. "An' just who'n hell would yuh be, one of them pot-gutted gods of Chiney? If you've got any thing agin 'em, then, by Gawd, go ahead an' arrest 'em—an' I'll make their bonds. They're goin' to work for me."

"An, maybe, Cross," leered back the sheriff, "yo're lettin' yoreself in for a whole hell of a lot of trouble! Them can

be the men who killed Ace Hanlon sometime yesterday!"

"If yuh find out for shore they did," Cassidy was laughing at him now, "then I'll pitch in the first hundred dollars gold to buy 'em medals. Get the hell to one side 'fore this big bay steps on yuh. We're goin' home, an' when I'm goin' home there ain't nothin' like yuh an' Sid Lyde, that long-necked deppity of yore's, gonna stop me. Come on, fellas!"

Zoe jumped to his left, Lyde to the right as Cassidy spurred his high-headed, half-broken horse forward. In a fast line, every man with a bundle or a sack tied behind the cantle of his saddle, they started galloping away, leaving a cloud of dust boiling around the suddenly coughing sheriff and the sputtering deputy.

"Yo're callin' for coffins for them two!" yelled the sheriff. "Yuh know yuh can't get away with this!"

But Cross Cassidy was galloping right on, and both Rider and Laredo were wondering now if they had flipped themselves from a hot frying pan straight into the fire. All down the line to Antelope Crossing they had had their warnings. Strangers were not wanted in this country. Trouble was here, breaking out spasmodically, old friends goaded into war against each other, murder so common men spoke of it with no more alarm than when speaking of a case of chicken-pox.

To get through and on into Montana had been the original aims of Rider and old man Laredo. It was still a possible goal even now as they rode out of town, knowing they could leave Cross Cassidy at any hour if the notion came to them. Staying here in town would probably mean going to jail, and no man had ever gained by that, especially when facing a trumped-up charge.

"Ace Hanlon, huh?" Cassidy slowed the pace when Rider mentioned the name after they had swung to the left at the

head of the street and turned down into the mouth of a gorge. "Hell, I thought ever'body knowed Ace! Big, knot-headed, yellow-haired know-it-all with a little outfit about half-way between Medicine Butte an' Antelope Crossin'. One of them twin-calf fellas! One spring he had sixteen cows with twins!" He grinned. "Plenty had reasons an' ambitions to shoot 'im, but who done it is more'n I can say.

"War's here, gettin' bigger an' better. Looks like it's Kelly-Honey now. Rube Honey and Joe Kelley've been friends for years and years. Ever'body knows they're bein' tricked into hatin' the hell outa each other. Know it themselves, almost, but when yuh wake up some mornin' findin' cows missin' an' later yuh find 'em hid out on yore best friend's range, naturally—"

"Look out" Rider yelled just in time, spurring his chestnut-sorrel furiously, lunging him on and out of danger. A slight noise from the east rim had caused him to glance up, eyes suddenly popping when he saw a round rock that must have weighed a thousand pounds coming down. It fell with a tremendous crash just three yards behind his horse, Laredo and old Milt Miller wheeling back without an instant to spare, the stone breaking into shattered bits and spilling off the trail and down into the river.

"Damn close, that!" yelled Cassidy as they shot on into a sudden widening of the gorge that turned it into a broad canyon. "Look! Another'n comin' down!"

THERE were three of them, one after the other, rolling off the rim, coming down as the first had come. But everybody was warned now, some still galloping back down the trail, Laredo and Miller coming on again, slashing with their reins and spurring furiously.

Cassidy led the way to a tall, flat-topped rise of rimrocks covered with dense

little pines. Swinging in behind it, he left his saddle with a leap, rifle in his hand, Rider following him, his rifle ready as the two old men came racing up. Getting to the top of the rise with Cassidy, Rider dropped flat on his stomach as rifles started crashing from the rim in sputtering bursts.

"Look!" Cassidy lifted his hand and pointed westward. "Ain't shootin' at us! Damn it, they're shootin' at Honey Kelly an' her kid brother, Rube! Both of 'em named for the Honeys!"

Rider saw the girl and the youth then on the west rim, the girl tall, reddish-haired, mounted on a lunging and rearing buckskin. The youth was just behind her, wheeling a big pinto to run for it. Just ahead of the girl bullets were smacking the ground, others kicking up puffs of dust behind the pinto.

Suddenly Rider, Cassidy and the two old men were opening a hot fire on the east rim. Rider heard a horse bawl up there in a pine thicket. Shortly after that the waving tops of the trees and limbs told him that the would-be killers were leaving. When it was quiet again Cassidy bucked to his feet.

"Now we'll have a look!" he cried. "Me an' this Rider fella. Stay here with the old duck, Milt, an' keep the rim covered. This is just too damn much for me, gettin' rocks piled down on me less'n four miles from Medicine Butte! Somebody sent them fellas ahead of us, knowin' I was gonna bring yuh two outa town with us."

Rider followed him back to the horses and kept behind him as he raced on to a wide old ledge trail in the east wall. Reaching the tip, they pulled up, but whoever had been here had fled the scene. Then they rode on into the pines, pulling up with a jerk again as they saw a dead horse sprawled on the carpet of pine needles ahead of them.

"Damn!" swore Cassidy again. "I allus

hate to find out I killed a good horse!"

"We didn't!" Rider was down, looking at the horse. "Look at the powder burn on the side of his head! Somebody right here shot that horse at close range with a rifle!"

"An' a good reason!" Cassidy was staring. The horse had flopped over on its left side. On the right hip was a brand that read RH. "A Rube Honey horse! They musta took the saddle an' bridle with 'em!"

"Saddle and bridle were taken off before the horse was killed!" exclaimed Rider. The needles here are not disturbed, showing no sign of where a saddle had been dragged off his back."

"Yeah, mighty, mighty purty!" Cassidy took a big knife from his pocket and carefully cut away a square piece of the skin, to destroy any sign of what the brand might have been. Rolling up the hide he turned back to his horse. "Now we get the hell off of here!"

Riding back below, Cassidy cut the hide into strips and threw them into the river. When they turned to ride on, the others having come up, they saw Honey Kelly and her brother down in the canyon waiting for them. Cassidy spoke from the side of his mouth.

"I'll do the talkin', Rider. Honey's got hawg-sense. Can't depend too much on the boy. He gabbles too much. Keep 'im busy while I get Honey off to one side an' tell 'er what I want to tell 'er. Of late Joe Kelly, her daddy, is a damn fool when yuh excite 'im. Young Rube's mean. Been that way since a wild horse busted his skull three years ago. Milt used to handle 'im, but can't any more. Rube hates the hell out of 'im of late, an' we ain't never been able to find out why."

YOUNG Rube Kelly was about seventeen, high-headed, sandy-haired, with a contemptuous little smirk frozen on his sharp face. Around him were a pair of

wide belts filled with cartridges, a new Colt at either hip. The moment Cassidy spoke the boy was showering him with abuse.

"To hell with that!" he yelled. "Any talk yuh wanta make with my sister, Cross Cassidy, will be made right here, by Gawd!"

"Rube!" said the girl. "Get away from here with that mean mouth of yours!"

"Go to hell!" snarled back the boy. "I don't like Cross Cassidy! He stinks clear to hell for my money! Get away from here, Cross! *Get away!*" His right hand slapped down to the butt of a six-shooter. "Ever'body ain't a damn fool! We know where yuh stand in the troubles these days! Yo're *lice!*"

"Easy with that gun, Rube." Cross Cassidy had gone white, but he was trying to hold himself. "Yore mammy an' daddy never laid a quirt on yore back in yore life, when the blood tore outa yuh a few times mighta made a man outa yuh. All yuh want is every damn thing yuh can get yore hungry paws on for nothin'! Yo've never paid for the salt that went in yore bread since yuh was born!"

"Damn yuh, Cross Cassidy," yelled the boy, "I'm gonna shoot yuh!"

Rider quickly jumped his horse forward, slamming into the pinto. He grabbed the boy by the back of the collar, whipped him out of his saddle and across his sorrel's neck, then tore the Colt out of his hand and flung it to one side. Before the youth could grab it, he had the second weapon, sending it the way of the first. By that time old Ben Laredo was lurching his horse up beside them. Not stopping, Rider lifted the youth by the slack of the trousers and the back of the collar, throwing him to Laredo.

"Take him away from here!" he said. "This arrogant young yap is crazy as hell!"

"Needs a latigo, that's all!" bellowed back the old man. "His kind need the

lash damn nigh from the cradle up an' if they don't get it they turn out like this thing. Shut yore damn mouth 'fore I shove my saddle horn in it an' tear the blood outa yuh with my quirt, yuh smart fool!"

Fear took the place of the youth's bitter arrogance before Laredo could wheel away with him and take him down the north side of the rise. Rider heard him start whimpering and pleading. He turned and looked at the white-faced girl, touching his hat as he spoke.

"Sorry, ma'am, but I couldn't let him shoot!"

"And I'm glad!" gasped the girl. "He won't even tell us where he got those new six-shooters and those belts!"

"That boy's no damn good, Honey!" Cross Cassidy was mad. "A damn brat, spoiled to death 'fore that outlaw hoss bunged 'im up! Pity he didn't kill 'im! But I'm sorry, Honey!" He swung close to her, putting a big hand on her shoulder. "Now that his hungry ears an' big mouth are gone, I wanta tell yuh somethin'." He told her about Rider and Laredo, how they had left town, and then of the rocks coming down, the bullets flying, and the horse he had cut the brand from.

"Yuh knowed about the shootin', of course," he scowled, trying to get it all out in a rush. "Maybe saw the rocks fallin'. Whoever was shootin' was just aimin' to herd yuh an' young Rube back—an' make yuh go home with a wild tale to hurt Rube Honey some more, 'specially after that hoss woulda been found with his brand on it. Somebody in this country's got to keep their heads, Honey, or we're all goin' to hell in a pile!"

"I know it!" cried the girl, desperately gripping her saddle horn. "But what can we do? Three days ago more of our cattle and horses were gone, and the men spotted them this morning at dawn on

Honey Range! What can we do, Cross?"

"Go on home, now," ordered Cassidy. "Take young Rube's guns with yuh an' give 'em to yore daddy. Tell yore daddy an' mammy what happened, but don't tell the others. But somehow, Honey, we've got to beat this thing. We'll give yuh about a mile start on young Rube so he won't be tryin' to take them guns away from yuh."

They watched her go, giving her a full mile and a half start before young Kelly was released. As soon as the youth was in his saddle and out of reach, he was screaming curses back at them, racing on after the girl, her long-legged buckskin easily keeping the boy well behind. When they were out of sight Cassidy, glum and silent, led the way on. Both the silence and glumness suddenly left him when they had mounted a tall ridge and came in sight of the log houses, sheds and corrals of his big ranch.

"Gawd A'mighty," he yelled, "look what's happenin' to us! The whole damn place is afire! Somebody's burnin' me slap-dab to the ground!"

GREAT flames were lolling up against the background of gray cliffs at the head of the canyon. For a time it looked as though the house, bunkhouse, corrals and sheds were going up in flames and smoke, but as they thundered closer and closer they could see that the fire was in four enormous haystacks almost against the cliffs. Cowboys and even his wife and the old Chinese cook were out there battling the flames and hurling pails of water on the ends of sheds when they started to smoke in the intense heat.

"Half my winter feed gone to hell!" wailed Cassidy as they came charging up, every rider flinging down. "Somebody'll pay for this!"

With more help now rushing water from a little stream behind the corrals they fought it out, men sweating like

trembling horses from the incessant rushing back and forth. Stopping at last to rest they heard hoofs pounding across the canyon to them from the west, then another wild pounding from the east.

"Gawd A'mighty, now *whut!*" groaned Cassidy. "Rube Honey an' his men from the east, Joe Kelly an' a pack of his riders from the west. Now I reckon we'll be caught in the middle of a gunfight!"

"Best thing that can happen if you can handle it," cried Rider, grimy and wet from helping fight the fire. "Use your head! Here, let me go stop Kelly, taking your cowboss with me! Ben Laredo'll go with you. Stop them, then get them together—and maybe they'll listen to you!"

It was clutching at the wind, but even as he wheeled toward Kelly and his crowd Rider saw more trouble just topping the ridge to southward. It was the sheriff of Medicine Butte and Sid Lyde, his deputy. Behind them galloped seven men, rifles across their saddles. Ignoring them, Rider kept on toward the advancing Kelly crowd, pulling up with old Milt Miller.

"You don't know me, but you do know Milt Miller," he told the big, red-faced, dark-haired Kelly. "You know other things, too, when it comes to the cattle game. Common sense should tell you—and should tell Rube Honey—that you're being made the victims of one of the oldest, meanest things in the business, when somebody wants your range, your cattle and horses."

"Damn it," suddenly raged Kelly, "that's what I tried to tell Rube Honey! He listened at the start. Then one of his men was found shot near a calf tied down by a brandin' fire one mornin'. One of my calves with my brand on it. Then this an' that kept happenin'. I tried to be reasonable. Damn it, I've knowed Rube a long time. Knowed Cross Cassidy a long time, too. He's in the middle

here, doin' his best to help both of us. An' Rube, damn 'im, don't lis'en to a thing anybody tries to tell 'im! The old fool—"

Suddenly a shot in the distance behind his crowd cut him off, making him wheel in his saddle. A second report came now, then a third, a fourth, hoofs of riders hidden in a little pine thicket in the distance beginning to drum. Out of that fierce drumming came another long-ringing report, then a girl's scream.

"Gawd A'mighty," cried old Milt Miller, "that's Honey, Joe!"

"Honey it is!" bawled Kelly as the girl suddenly broke cover six or seven hundred yards away. "Somebody's shootin' at 'er! Drag up yore rifles, fellas! Damn it, that's my gal in trouble!"

Rider was glad a thousand times afterwards that he only reached for his rifle, never lifting it, a sudden thought stopping him. Kelly men were quicker. Five of them suddenly had their rifles up, Kelly's rising only a few seconds behind them. No one could actually see who was following the girl, the trees hiding him for the moment, but all of them except the slower Kelly were suddenly firing, shooting into waving limbs and the tops of the pines, the girl screaming at them. Then, as suddenly as this wild thing had started, the firing was at an end, a pinto horse racing out of the pines, a youth draped over the saddle horn, still clutching a new high-powered rifle.

"Hell, boys!" wailed Kelly. "That's my young Rube, been shootin' at his own sister! The boy's gone crazy as a mad dog!"

"He is crazy!" screamed the girl when she thundered up on her high-tempered buckskin. "He was going to shoot Cross Cassidy only a short time ago. That man," she pointed to Rider, "took his new six-shooters away from him and later gave them to me. I was out-running him home to give the things to you when he stopped

by a rock pile and came up with that shiny-new rifle. I saw you heading this way from the distance, and—and I turned this way. Watch him! He's stark mad, I tell you!"

THERE was little use in watching young Rube Kelly now. Hit in the left side of the stomach by a bullet, he fell from his saddle when the wild-eyed pinto plunged up, coming to a fast stop. Hitting the ground on the back of his neck and shoulders, rifle flying from his hands, he twisted over, lying there glaring at them with wild eyes.

"Nobody's takin' my new guns!" he yowled, a white froth gathered around the corners of his mouth. He stabbed a finger at Rider. "I aim to kill him yet! I aim to kill Cross Cassidy. I've said I'd do that, just like I shot Ace Hanlon yesterday mornin' 'fore daylight when he stepped outa his house. Knowed too

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much, talked too much! Carl Zoe said that. So did ol' Skeleton Doc Budlong down at the bank!"

"Carl Zoe—an' Doc Budlong!" Tall, grim-faced and gray-haired Rube Honey had left his crowd behind and was pulling up, unable to keep back with all this sudden excitement here. "What'n hell are yuh sayin', Rube? Yuh know that me an' yuh has allus been close friends an'—"

"Ain't nobody but Carl my real friend!" yelled the boy. "He gives me money, he buys me guns. Doc Budlong wants these fights. Aims to grab the whole country, an' I've been helpin' 'em." He laughed crazily, blood now coming into the froth on his lips, then he saw the sheriff and his gang pulling up, Zoe suddenly white-faced and staring. "Help me outa this, Carl! I was gonna kill Cross Cassidy today. Honey an' these dumb clucks stopped me. I'd a got 'im tonight. Yuh said I was yore best man an' yuh was gonna make me a deppity next year. I ain't missed killin' a man yuh sent me atter, have I now, Carl?"

"Good Lord!" moaned the sheriff, looking ready to pitch out of his big saddle. "The boy—the boy's gone crazy sure now! Yuh can't believe a thing he says!" His wild eyes swept the crowd. "Yuh all know what that mean hoss done to 'im! Ain't a man who could believe a word he'd say! He—he's a plain maniac now! A mad dog snappin' at ever'thing an' ever' body! Better get 'im to a doctor!"

"So yuh turn again me, too, huh?" A sudden spasm was making the youth jerk himself into a knot, both hands gripping his stomach, blood beginning to flutter from his lips. "Well, by Gawd! After all the men I helped yuh an' yore pack kill! After the cows an' horses I've run back an' forth at night. Gawdamn, Carl, this is a double-cross! Yuh know all the big things I've been doing, helpin' yuh an' the fellas quiet-workin' for yuh,

an' that long ol' Doc Budlong! Yuh called me the—the Billy the Kid of all the North!"

"He's a liar!" wailed the sheriff, beginning to back his horse away. "Yuh can't believe a thing he says, I tell yuh! Quit—quit crowdin' up close 'round me! I'm the sheriff! *I'm the sheriff!*"

"Sheriff, hell!" Jarring laughter filled the air. Even Rube Honey's men had come forward, swinging in behind the sheriff and his little gang, six-shooters bristling. "Go on, young Rube, an' tell the rest of it!"

"Carl—knows—all about—it!" The youth was going fast, Sam Rider and the girl on their knees beside him. The sheriff seemed to be gripped with terror so fiercely he could not see that death was soon going to close the dying youth's eyes forever.

"Come clean, Carl Zoe!" The whole crowd was pressing forward and around him now. "There's plenty of tall limbs here to hang yuh an' yore crowd on!"

"Tell 'im ever'thing, Carl!" Sid Lyle was finding his voice. "I—I ain't done no ridin' an' shootin' at night! I ain't been workin' to make war here just to see ol' Doc get richer an' richer! Tell 'em—an' save yore neck as long as yuh can, yuh damned fool!"

Sam Rider and old Ben Laredo were taking no further part in it. They were there with a few others straightening the dying youth out on his back and mopping the blood from his mouth. The rest were swirled around the sheriff and his little crowd, snatching away their weapons, getting ready to take them back to Medicine Butte, the sheriff talking, pleading and begging, shaking with terror and blubbering like a fool. The boy on the ground shivered, relaxed, and was still. Rider slipped a steadying arm around the girl's shoulders as she buried her face in her hands and sobbed. . . .



They rode in, screaming their war cries.

BOOTS and SADDLES

By NORMAN B. WOLFE

"You can't fight Apaches with Gatling guns!" the old desert wolf had warned. And as the painted savage legion rode down on his doomed command, it was up to Captain Saber McDowell either to run for safety, or stay and fight it out—with his last trooper's blood!

CAPTAIN SABER McDOWELL and his company of troopers, followed by the three Gatling gun carriages, swept into the parade ground of Fort Miles just as Massey was conducting afternoon inspection. McDowell caught the situation in a glance, issued a few sharp commands and neatly deployed his men to the south end of the grounds. There, in front of the company he sat his horse stiffly, as if he hadn't just finished a deadly, man and horse-beating desert

march of twenty five miles, and politely waited for the older captain to finish his tour.

The stiff-necked desert soldier, parade-groomed and erect, took his time with hardly a look at the newcomers. When he finally returned to the front of headquarters to dismiss, Saber McDowell dismounted and handing the reins to Sergeant Bracken, began striding diagonally across the flat, hard-packed ground.

"This is going to be tough," he thought. "The colonel wasn't fooling when he told me this wasn't any pleasant job."

Massey, dismissing his adjutant, as his three companies broke and drifted back to barracks and stables, returned McDowell's salute and handshake curtly. "Do you always make your arrival under assault tactics, Captain?"

Saber looked at this small, wiry, gray-haired man thoughtfully. "Always, sir," he said. "Keeps my men in trim."

The "sir" was for the twenty years' seniority belonging to Massey, and for his formidable reputation. The name "desert wolf" had been aptly applied. This man was of the desert and he knew well its ways. His swift cavalry raids against Sioux, Cheyennes and Apaches made him a legend in frontier annals. He was a field-soldier as well as a master at staff work, and stubborn as hell to boot. He held to the opinion that in Indian warfare the staff work was best done in the field, and he had proven himself right and others wrong too many times to gain the pleasure of promotion committees back in Washington. After thirty years in the desert, and at the point of retirement age, he was still a captain.

McDowell thought of all this in a flash, and was a little awed at the other. Too, it was an unpleasant sensation to have combined orders for Massey's promotion and retirement in his pocket. Yes, it was going to be tough. They sure had handed him a hot potato.

Massey's cold glance swept to the three carriages with the mounted Gatlings. "And what are those things?"

"Gatling guns," said Saber, dropping the "sir" because of the tone of the question. He was rather surprised that Massey didn't know of them. "Mittrailleuses . . . some prefer to call them simply machine guns."

"Machine—guns?" the desert wolf's teeth showed in a sneer. "What a word." Contempt dripped from the thin lips. "What next? Will we be fighting the Apaches with heavy ordnance?"

It was obvious that he did not think much of the idea. Massey was known for not even using wagon trains in the field because they were too slow. To fight some of the finest cavalry fighters the world has ever known, he believed in matching their methods of march and tactics. If the Indian attained mobility and swiftness by each man carrying only dried meat and a cured horse intestine full of water, the white man could do the same by using hard-tack, pemmican, dried fruit and extra canteens. He had won campaigns and enemy respect that way. His unexpected, swift punitive expeditions were a by-word among the redmen.

Fort Miles was only a fighting man's headquarters, a desert wolf's lair. Washington wanted to change all that. A bigger and stronger establishment was wanted to satisfy the immigrant pressure, and Saber McDowell, with an eventual promise of a colonelcy on the horizon, was here to inaugurate those changes.

"They fire a hundred twenty rounds a minute," he said. "Either mounted on the carriages or on the ground."

Massey said, "On the carriages the crews would be sitting ducks to the Apaches; on the ground the damned things are too heavy for mobility. What are you going to do, ask the Apaches to ride up to them and then stop to be sprayed with bullets?"

SABER reddened. The Gatlings were clumsy things. Multiple rifle bores were incorporated in long heavy cylinders, the whole cylinder revolving and firing by the turn of a large handcrank. The gun was turned and tilted by handcranks, and stood on four stubby pipelegs—the whole unit weighing in the neighborhood of three hundred pounds. “The British have used it with great effect in the Crimea and in Afghanistan.”

Massey shrugged. “The British . . . Apaches are something else again. Bullet sprayers!” He turned away from the sight of the three monstrosities, about which some of his men were crowding with curious interest. Saber McDowell said defensively: “Warefare gets modern; progress must be followed.”

“Modern? Warfare is the most ancient art man knows. Beyond the advent of gunpowder nothing will ever truly modernize it,” Massey spoke didactically, “till man finally learns to do without war.” There was something in his attitude which seemed to indicate that he found shooting at Apaches with “bullet-sprayers” not quite cricket. “Are you here on a transient mission, Captain?”

McDowell hesitated, cleared his throat. He was in no mood to spring his unpleasant surprise here and now on Massey, for despite the other’s chill ways, he felt a strange liking for the man. “I don’t know exactly. I carry some sealed orders for both you and me. I’ll present them to you. My immediate orders are to join you here at Fort Miles till you break the seals.”

“Then we’ll get you settled first then, since there seems no hurry about the sealed orders.” Massey’s glance went along Saber’s D Company, 11th Cavalry. Did he guess what was in those orders? Did his wolf-sense smell it? Could he know that already escorted wagon trains carrying lumber and laborers were moving across the plains to enlarge the post? That E company of the 11th was moving in too,

under Lieutenant Stokes, to join the Fort Miles command under Captain Saber McDowell? “Some of your men will have to double up at the barracks, but I guess we have plenty of stable room. Sergeant Cleaver!”

Cleaver’s stocky form came at a dignified run across the parade ground to get quarters assignments for the newly arrived contingent and show them in. McDowell beckoned to his lieutenant and turned to Massey: “May I present Lieutenant Bridell. . . .”

The two officers exchanged salutes and shook hands mechanically. “I shall expect you gentlemen for dinner,” Massey said. “But don’t expect too much. We live rough and scant here. This is the desert.” He turned on his heel and strode back into headquarters.

Bridell looked after him. “Old ramrod,” he muttered. “Don’t expect too much, gentlemen . . .”

At that moment the sun dropped behind the western low rockrim, suddenly pulling in all the long black shadows with it, leaving a soft, smooth darkness. “So that’s sundown,” said McDowell absently. He was thinking of Massey, and in his mind thanking the colonel for providing him with sealed orders. This way the burden was taken from his shoulders, and he could always pretend that he did not know what was in them.

“THE Cheyennes were the first,” said Captain Massey through the blue cigar smoke. “It took that tribe less than three decades; three decades, gentlemen; to adapt themselves to the horse and become the world’s foremost riders and cavalry fighters. Think of that!” He leaned back and drummed thoughtfully on the table. “Three of Coronado’s runaways did it. That’s all they had to start with.”

They sat in the main room of Massey’s private quarters. Behind him on the wall were weapons and saddles of the Indian

tribes the captain had fought. McDowell felt that the lonely soldier had aquired a great respect for his adversaries during the years. The things he had collected were not so much trophies as museum pieces.

The captain could let himself go when talking on his favorite subject. He knew the Indians inside out, and there was sometimes in his tone a note almost of regret when he suggested that someday the redman, the cavalry man and warrior would be gone for good. His own story, his own life would then be ended, too.

Bridell broke in youthfully, "Ah, Captain, the only good Indian is a dead Indian." He nodded toward a string of scalps mounted along the slender lance of a company standard in the corner. "Isn't that proof enough of the ruthless enemy we fight?"

Massey got to his feet and strode over to the lance. "Mr. Bridell, these are not white scalps taken by Apaches. These are Apache scalps taken by *my* men." He hesitated a moment. "Even for even, and turn about is fair in any game."

There was silence, and Saber McDowell thought of the way Massey had said "game". That was it; Indian warfare was a game to him, and he met the enemy on his own ground. This man was an odd character. No wonder Washington was leary of him. "Next to adapt himself to the horse," Massey went on, "was the Navajo. After that the Comanche, then some of the Sioux tribes." He began striding up and down. "One wonders what the redman could have developed into if he had been allowed the horse a few centuries longer, when one considers that most of the world's great empires and civilizations were built and developed mainly through access to the use of the horse. It's a thought, gentlemen. Where would the Pharoahs, the Assyrians, the Persians or Alexander have got if it were not for the horse?"

The dinner had been better than expected. Antelope roast, a light-bodied Mexican dry wine, fruits, strong black coffee. But there were no ladies to lighten the atmosphere.

When the junior officers had left, the two captains faced each other across the table. "The orders," said Massey, breaking an uncomfortable stillness. "I suppose this would be as good a time for them as any. Now, we'll find out why you are here."

McDowell said nothing, but opened his tunic and extracted the two long, flat, sealed converts. He could hear his own heartbeat, and the regular, muffled tread of a sentry. Massey had opened the promotion order first with hard crisp fingers. As he scanned the page a thin wry smile flitted across. There was a just barely perceptible shrug. "Major," he said. "Well, they took their time about it."

Saber McDowell said stiffly, "Congratulations, sir," trying to sound utterly casual and even-toned. Massey gave him a glance, nodded curtly in acknowledgement, and reached for the second envelope. There had been a glint of suspicion in that glance.

The envelope held two documents. "One is for you," said Massey and shot it across the table.

The two men read in silence. Saber knew the message in his orders word for word, but he read them again. When he looked up eventually and met Major Massey's steel-gray eyes, it seemed that Massey had suddenly aged ten years. His skull seemed to have shrunk, the eyes sinking back. He sat utterly still for several minutes, till Saber thought that he could not stand the tension any longer. At last Massey spoke, thin wooden lips moving under the close-cropped moustache,

"Congratulations, Captain."

"I'm sorry, Major . . ." Saber wished himself a thousand miles away, and at this moment hated Colonel Enderby and every-

one on staff in Washington. He hated the Army.

MASSEY got to his feet. "Sorry? Why should you be sorry, Captain? You relieve me, you take over a garrison to be enlarged with two additional companies, and your most worthy Gatlings . . . plus an expanded trading post." There was a slight sardonic note, "Captain, who knows, you may be the founder of a great city. For me? Never feel sorry for a soldier, McDowell; that's a sign of weakness . . ." He strolled over and absently dangled the scalp-string on the mounted lance. "A soldier gives his life to the army, his years and blood to the desert . . . and when some pot-bellied desk colonel in Washington calls dismiss, the soldier simply clicks his heels, salutes . . . and dismisses."

Massey looked old and lost and Saber knew that army life was all Massey knew, that the man had no relatives, no close friends, that without commission and command there was nothing for him. It was not a retirement order he had handed the desert wolf; it was a death warrant.

Massey leaned forward and calmly poured two ponies of bourbon from the bottle. "A nightcap," he said. "You'll want to get to your sleep. . . ."

As the two men, standing on opposite sides of the table from each other, drank off the liquor in dead silence, Saber McDowell heard in the far, dark distance approaching hoofbeats across sandy ground . . . then the soft but urgent challenge of the sentry.

As he was in the doorway, and Massey was bidding him good night, hurried steps came along the corridor behind him. In a moment Sergeant Cleaver's square shoulders passed him deferentially. He knocked on the open door and snapped a salute. "Captain Massey, sir. Funston is in."

Some life came into the major's face. "Funston, eh? Show him in at once."

Already other steps came up the corri-

dor; soft, moccasined steps. A tall, swarthy man in drab shirt and buckskin breeches, and with a floppy black hat on his head came to the doorway. "Hello Captain, sorry to be busting in on you this late—"

Massey was already reaching a fresh glass from a sideboard and tipping the bottle. "Funston," he said with evident pleasure.

Cleaver retired but McDowell lingered in the doorway. He had heard of Funston. Funston's fame had reached even Washington. Massey saw him linger; measured him coldly, obviously waiting for him to leave him alone with the scout. Then he shrugged, as if at the inevitable and made a gesture toward Funston who just then was tossing off his drink.

"Ah well, Captain, you two will have to work together in the future. Better you meet now. Funston, this is Captain McDowell."

The scout held out a big hand at the end of a long loose-jointed arm. His face was hollow-cheeked and deeply lined. Round blue eyes withheld judgement, but Saber felt a contempt for the military emanating from the man.

"Future commanding officer of Fort Miles," said Massey to Funston. "You're looking at Major Massey, U. S. Army retired, Funston."

The scout's eyebrows went up, his lower lip sagged; he stared at the major while the silence spoke volumes. The understanding between the two men made McDowell so completely an outsider that he felt an strong urge to leave.

Massey walked to a wall case and peeled out a map, which he spread on the table. "Sit down, Funston." He looked sharply up at Saber. "You want to be in on this, Captain?"

The orders had read: "Take over command upon delivery and receipt of orders present. . . ." That was typical Washington. You did not ride into an Indian country outpost and take over at a mo-

ment's notice. You eased yourself in.

"Perhaps I had better," Saber said. "It will probably be my eventual concern." He walked back to the table.

FUNSTON, his black hat still on, took another whiskey and drawled: "Satanka is moving south, Major. Fifty mounted warriors, about thirty rifles between them. Picking up the Hopatch Comanches at Crazy Bull Creek as far as I can make out. I think they are going to keep on going south and make a rendezvous with Tonaro in the White Valley region." He leaned back and pushed the hat off his head till it hung by its rawhide strap. "Yep, I think this is it. I'll almost bet this is the big affair Satanka has been brewing up all this while. He thinks you won't be onto him in time, and that he can put it over. If he gets the Crazy Bull crowd and Tonaro together he'll really have a snow-ball rolling."

Massey was all absorbed in the map; his lean brown finger tracing courses and routes over the topographical numbers. "Here, this way, did you say? No, he won't get them together. We'll intercept him before he hits Crazy Bull. So he thinks I'm asleep, does he?" He gave Funston a look. "Well, I'll tell you, Funston, this time I'll get Satanka; and I mean to have him. This time I'll finish him for good."

As they talked on, mentioning names and places McDowell followed them avidly. Satanka was an Apache chief, the Hopatch were Kiowa Comanches, and Tonaro headed another Apache contingent. There were rumors that Satanka's plans for an uprising reached across the border. If that was true, formidable trouble was at hand. McDowell began to suspect that perhaps somebody at staff had known what he was about when he wanted to enlarge and re-equip Fort Miles as a major garrison. The figures of Massey's and Funston's talk ran to between four and five

hundred mounted and armed warriors. Well-mounted, though perhaps inferior in arms and equipment, their heavy odds in numbers made a telling factor.

"But suppose you don't intercept Satanka before he joins Hopatch's Comanches, Major?" he interjected.

Massey looked up in absent-minded irritation. "But I *will* intercept him." He strode to the door and opened it, called in Cleaver. "Company A, half company B ride in three hours; iron rations, double canteens. Notify the lieutenants."

Cleaver saluted sharply and departed.

McDowell said, "That's a small force. Suppose five hundred Indians should roll down on you, Major . . . it would be sheer folly."

Massey said testily, "Are you taking command now, Captain McDowell?"

"My orders read to anticipate any emergency and participate in any action that may require my services."

"Suppose I don't require them, Captain. I happen to outrank you, sir!"

For the first time sparks flew between the two men. This campaign was Massey's; McDowell was a damned intruder. McDowell said, and saw the other wince at the words: "Retired, you do, Major. I have a suggestion. Let the Indians consolidate; let Satanka rendezvous with Hopatch and Tonaro. . . ." He ran his finger over the map. "Herd them down into White Valley and I'll circle south meanwhile and wait for them with the Gatlings. We'll teach the redman something about modern warfare that he does not expect. We'll kill the whole uprising in one blow . . ."

"Fantastic," said Massey with a sneer. "Sheer folly to let them consolidate. That's one thing you don't allow Indians. You stab at them, keep them apart. Ah, yes, the Gatlings; the wonderful Gatlings. Perhaps, Captain, the redman may teach you something about desert warfare that you do not expect. Machine guns!"

He turned to start folding the map, his gesture dismissing Saber McDowell and his suggestions. Saber went up to the table again. "There's no reason why I cannot strike south to reconnoiter White Valley and the Tonaro Apaches . . . just in case you should *not* succeed in preventing consolidation, is there, Major?" It was not a question, but a demand.

Massey considered his cards, said tartly, "Can your men ride in three hours?"

"In one hour, Major!"

He hoped they could. He hoped they would not curse him into seven hells for robbing them of their earned sleep. He requested pencil and paper, unfolded the half-folded map again and began copying swiftly hills and trails and altitude numbers. "Look for me along this line of low hills," he told Massey. "If not there, further south and west. I'll sent Lieutenant Bridell to liaison with you when I'm in position." He handed the map back to the major. "We ride in one hour . . . with the Gatlings."

"Luck," said Massey acidly and saluted.

WHITE VALLEY lay dead and empty in the moonlight. The thin line of the 11th's Company D and the three Gatling carriages snaked into it quietly and alert. The Arizona hills held nothing except the faint swish of yellow sand beneath the hoofs and boots moving among the cactus shadows.

The valley widened up toward northwest, and from there the possible movements of Tonaro hordes might come. Saber moved the company off the trail and at-eased it under the swing of a low hill. The men squatted on the ground and pulled on the canteens after the forced march. The horses drank their small ration of water greedily out of the canvas nose buckets.

McDowell stood in impatience, studying the map in the bright moon, Bracken at his side, till Bridell and a trooper

walked toward them, leading their horses.

"Not a sign of anything," said Bridell. "We scouted three miles out and circled. Kept to cover and shadows. Nothing." He drank from a canteen, and said, "I don't like it. Too quiet."

McDowell pondered. He might be too far south, or not in the right valley at all. The low moon cast dim shadows, distorting everything. Soon dawn would come up and make a different picture. He thought of the possibility that Massey would intercept Satanka and nip the whole consolidation movement in the bud. It would make McDowell look like a fool. On the other hand, if Massey rolled the three Indian groups before him, and the Gatlings met them successfully at dawn, great credit would go to Saber, and his inauguration as garrison commander would be an auspicious one.

"We'll have to take a chance," he said. "Set out the Gatlings, spaced on those three hills. Keep as good cover as you can, but do not dismount them from the wagons. Lay out range markers."

Almost silent, the carriages creaked out into the dark with their crews and escorts. As Bridell, in command of them, left, Saber said, "We'll file past you and fan out northwest, to draw them in under your enfilade by retreating. They'll be surprised."

"If they come," said Bridell.

"Luck to you, Steve."

Bridell's white teeth showed in the dark. "Let's hope something happens. We've got to show old ramrod."

Five minutes later the Company D troopers stood to horse and mounted, loped into the valley past the carriages, leather squeaking and arms rattling. They deployed on a hill slope, dismounted, set posts near the crest and waited patiently for dawn and Apaches.

An hour ticked on. McDowell glanced nervously at his watch. Dawn pressed beneath the horizon. Suddenly one of the

Gatlings barked four times. Then silence again. Horses' ears were up, troopers' hairs on end. What had happened over there? Someone screamed back among the hills, and the scream was cut in the middle by the knife of silence.

Saber McDowell mounted half a company, left the rest under Bracken and galloped back at the head of his troopers. The first Gatling was still and silent on its wagon, the crew inert shapes around the wheels. The soldiers raced on. The second and third Gatlings had been overturned, wagons and all. The horses were gone; there was no enemy in sight when McDowell and his men rode up the hills. The troopers stared incredulously. Only a few of them were veterans of the desert; most of them had never seen what the sneaking Apache can do to an enemy. Boots, trousers and tunics off; bellies and throats cut . . . the first light of dawn looked mercilessly upon the ghastliness of the bloody tableau.

Saber, his insides churning, his hands shaking, stood over the crimson wreckage of what recently been Steven Bridell. Sitting ducks, Massey had said. Sitting ducks! With an effect he got a grip on himself and began issuing sharp commands, his voice cutting through the troopers' mental numbness and terror. "Right the carriages . . . get canvas, cover the bodies decently and load them."

THE men found sudden welcome relief in these hasty activities. Soon the casualties were stacked under cover in one carriage, spare horses were hitched. Bracken sent a man to advise that the first Gatling crew had been found killed with arrows, but un mutilated. "What are the orders, Captain?"

Abandon the Gatlings and make a run for it; that would be the sanest. This enemy was unseen and watching. McDowell's eyes swept the desert and the hills. They were out there, somewhere,

ready and waiting for his reaction to the initial massacre. How many? You could never guess. He looked back along the entrance to the desert, to the hills on either side of it. Make a run out of there and the vise might close. Even now he could see the sneer on the major's face. To come running home without the renowned Gatlings, to slink back with a crushed theory of modern warfare. . . . His pride shrank from it. But wasn't this too big for pride?

Some of his troopers were watching him hold up Bracken's messenger with his indecision, and nervousness spread among them. To move ahead and perhaps rendezvous with Massey moving southward into the other end of White Valley? He might clash with Hopatch's Comanches first. How was he to know how Massey had fared? Maybe Funston for once had his information wrong. That could happen. . . .

"Tell Sergeant Bracken to send the number one Gatling here; to wait for signal to join us. We are taking up position on these two hills, awaiting enemy attack."

"Yes sir." The man mounted and rode off.

Saber began hearing his own voice rattling off commands. The troopers went to work, feverishly dismantling the heavy guns from the wagons and entrenching them on top of the hills, ducking carefully and looking about for enemy signs while they dug in the bloody sand. Soon only the heavy rifle cylinders showed above the hill tops, one on one, two on the other. Between hills, forty feet lower than the Gatlings, the troop parked horses and carriages. Troopers deployed on foot at either end, rifles ready.

Upon signal Bracken and his men joined the main force. "Sitting it out, eh, sir?" The sergeant's hard face showed worry. His eyes calculated the wisdom of Saber's preparations. "Those devils have patience,

sir. They'll wait all day till nightfall. . . ."

"They expect us to run out, Bracken. I'm correcting my initial mistake. We should have stayed solid in the first place and have dug in." Only to a noncom as old and devoted as Bracken could he make such an admission. Mistake is such a little word, but here it meant twelve men dead . . . and Steve Bridell gone. The meaning hung heavy between the two men. McDowell felt that Bracken disagreed with him, that the thing to do would be to advance into the valley and rendezvous with Massey. They could not afford two mistakes. And again he could hear Massey's sarcastic voice: "The British . . . Apaches are something else again." An enemy who struck in the dark, silently . . . who did not ride up and let themselves be sprayed with bullets. . . .

Suddenly Bracken stirred, his eyes went to the northwestern rockrim. "Sir—"

A thin smoke signal stood into the clear morning air, barely visible. It vanished, and a couple of puffs followed in quick succession. Automatically the two men's glances swung to the opposite side of the narrow valley. An answering signal rose from there too. "Well, we are here to stay," said Bracken.

THEY came then, as Saber McDowell would never forget them, in two great rushes. One from north-west and one from east-south-east, racing over the sandy plain, their blood-curdling war cry flying ahead of them. With beating heart Saber calculated their numbers. One hundred, two hundred, three hundred . . . four . . . yes there were easily four hundred wild horsemen rushing toward the shallow between the two Gatling hills.

The troopers held their fire but the Gatlings began their imperturbable *dong-dong-dong-dong-dong*. They seemed to have no effect on the enemy, shooting obliquely downward. Here and there a head-banded warrior rolled off, here a

horse stumbled and lay, but the two masses kept rolling. The Gatlings were failing horribly.

Like two waves the red men came washing towards the hollow between the hills, almost meeting, it seemed to Saber, before he gave the firing order. Rifles and pistols cut loose then, and enemy horses reared, hooves flailing almost in the troopers'



Chief Satanka

faces; then the waves subsided and washed back out of range to bunch up again on the plain. The Gatlings had stopped and Saber heard the scattered reports of rifle and pistol. Then one of the machine guns spoke again. He looked up through the drifting powdersmoke and saw his men still in command of the guns. The rifle cylinders started coughing away again, hacking with only scattered effect at the bunched enemy on the plain.

Saber gazed sweatingly out over the two approaches, strewn with ponies and half-naked bodies. Blood ran from a bullet wound in his left arm, but he had no time to heed it. He was about to ascertain his own losses when the waves started rolling once more.

This time the ring of troopers in blue were crowded badly; the horses milled frantically about the carriages and the Gatlings spoke ineffectually from the hills. The Hopatch Comanches and the Tonaro Apaches had consolidated, Saber knew then, and perhaps even Satanka was out there . . . before Massey and his men had even had a chance at stabbing them apart.

Funston must have failed. And he thought bitterly: "Here goes the new garrison of Fort Miles, and its commander with it."

His pistol failed and he picked up a dead trooper's and fired point blank at a warrior. The Indians were milling round the skirmishers now, but were being pistol-shot out of the saddles. Here and there, lance and saber exchanged blows with a clacking dull sound.

Miraculously the waves rolled back once more just as Saber thought all was lost. The skirmish line stood. "Bracken, Bracken!" he called, and just as miraculously Bracken came walking out of the smoke, sweating and bloodstained. "Here, sir."

"Bring two of the Gatlings down to level. We'll meet them head on and see if we have more luck."

But now the Apaches began their old tactics of riding circle, single file, rounding the hills and throwing shots from elbow-rested rifles. The Gatlings spoke again, this time from ground-level, but the spray of bullets failed to catch the targets of the single file. Rifles told better, but so did the Indian fire, having a more concentrated objective. Now the plain swarmed with a staggering multitude of Indians. Saber sweated and wondered about the fate of Massey. He saw three colorfully dressed chiefs on a distant hill and speculated whether Satanka was one of them. He noticed Bracken glancing at him, probably wondering if he were considering the wisdom of pulling out. Weighing the odds, he shook his head. That too, would mean leaving wounded and dead, and the Gatlings on the field.

"They're massing again for solid attack, sir," said Bracken then. Saber looked at the two Gatlings at either end of the cavalry stand. "They'll feel the Gatlings this time," he said hopefully.

But there was blackness in his heart. His losses had reached twenty-four dead now. If the tribes crushed him it would mean that the border uprising was under-

way and that it would take months to stop Satanka. Whole settlements would be wiped out before Washington would make an effective move. And why? Mainly because he and that old wolf, Massey had had a clash of wills and temper.

HE SHUDDERED as he saw the two waves of attack roll toward him again. His little troop could not stand forever against that multitude of replacements. For every Apache falling there were ten to take his place.

But this time the Gatlings were effective. From their ground positions the grinding, clunking monsters sent out streams of sweeping lead that mowed down the advancing hordes like wheat before giant scythes. The massed horses and men presented solid targets, and soon ponies rolled end over end throwing their riders clear to be picked off by McDowell's rifles. The desperation of the attacks carried the Indians to the edge of the cavalry's stand, then slowly, almost inch by inch the redskins fell back upon themselves, leaving much heavier losses than previously.

Saber heard trumpets upon the plain. Through smoke and swirling dust, with the rattle of the Gatlings in his ears, he saw the blue line of troopers advancing, steel drawn, across the southwestern floor of the valley, cutting an oblique line across his vision as they headed for the chiefs' hill. He thought he distinguished Massey's wiry form at the apex of the flying wedge, the yellow lance-standards leaning forward on their slender poles. The desert wolf had arrived to catch up on his mistake!

Quickly covering his rear with the Gatlings, Saber McDowell mounted the main body of his remaining troopers and proceeded to turn the retreat of the Apache and Comanche waves into a rout as he endeavored at the same time to rendezvous with Massey's company.

The turning point was reached. As he

galloped ahead he suddenly saw nothing but split-up bands of Indians fleeing in all directions. Only on the chief's hill was the battle still raging. But as McDowell's added wave of troopers stormed it, it turned into disastrous confusion for the enemy. . . .

The last meeting Saber was to have with Massey was one he would never forget. Dismounting, he found the old soldier, wounded, on the ground, leaning against his saddle for comfort, surrounded by his lieutenants and sergeant Cleaver. He was swearing at them, issuing orders: "Never neglect the rout, gentlemen. Don't stand there gawping because I got a little hole in my chest. After them! Split them up, ride them down . . . never let them rest. That's the way to handle them. Get going." A few more barked commands, and the officers mounted and rode off while Massey, suddenly hoarse and spitting blood, eagerly grasped the bottle Cleaver offered him.

Saber stepped up, seeing an Indian chief lying nearby, staring glassily into the sky. "Captain McDowell reporting," he said softly.

Massey looked up, and the two men stared at each other. "My apologies," said Massey. "I had my information wrong. A small body of Satanka's men drew me northwest before I realized that the three main bodies had already consolidated here. You've been standing the whole congregation off, McDowell. I'm afraid Funston's information was too old when he got it. They tricked him this time." He hesitated and looked toward the slain chief. "But I got Satanka. . . ." He groaned and pulled on the bottle again. "The Gatlings?" he said then with some of the old sneer in the tone. "How were—"

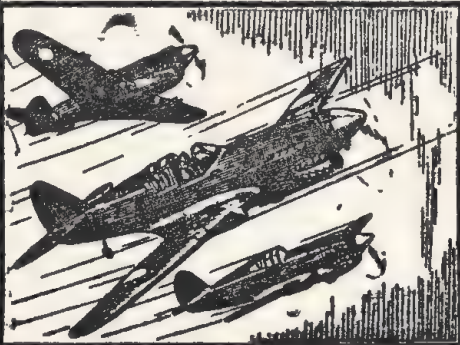
"Well, sir—" Saber made a gesture to explain.

"I knew it," said Massey, "I knew it. No damned good. Don't let the British teach you warfare, sir. . . ." He suddenly coughed and then saluted weakly. "Major Massey reporting . . . retired." And he fell back and was still in death.

Saber McDowell bit his lip as Cleaver bent over his master and gently closed the hard blue eyes. "A real soldier," Saber said almost inaudibly.

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BULLET ANTE

By ROBERT J. HOGAN

Steve fought to regain
his balance, grabbing
at the rail. . . .



IN THE little mission garden beside the coast, Father Joseph walked thoughtfully toward the olive grove, his head slightly bowed, his hands clasped before him.

He raised his head at the sound of galloping hoofs, and his mild eyes caught the first glimpse of horse and rider. They were coming up the road at a hard run, heading north. White foam streaked from the chawing mouth of the big horse.

"You think you got a sure bet in dealin' off the bottom — but, mister, when guns pack the pot, that's gambling! And your winnings are top dirt — in boothill!"

Father Joseph paused in his meditation and his eyes met the eyes of the man on the horse. The rider sat his horse tall and well, moved with him as one. He had a high, pearl-gray beaver hat tucked in a lump under his arm. His stylishly long hair was jarred and blown from the hard riding. But the rest of him was immaculate except for the dust on his checked trousers and black frock coat. Father Joseph blinked at the bright colors of the vest as the man reined in toward the drive.

"A pardon, Padre. Which road to the dock of the Seattle-bound packet?"

Father Joseph smiled and pointed. "To the left, my son."

"*Gracias, Padre.*" The man bowed and dug his sleek boot heels to the ribs of the lathered black gelding. They galloped off to the left fork and the padre stood watching the trail of dust that remained.

A tall, gaunt man with sunken cheeks coughed behind the padre, and said, "From many years of experience you know men, Father. What do you make of that one? A gambler, hurrying to pit his skill against ambitious card-playing fools aboard the packet?"

Father Joseph stroked his chin gently. "I was thinking of that," he said. "And I was also thinking that it is obvious that he is dressed the part."

The gaunt one smiled faintly. "You can look into the soul of a man, Father. What do you see in his?"

The padre studied the grass at his feet. "A strange thing," he said. "He has the face and the manners of a gentleman, and the conduct of a successful businessman who has overdressed for his part as a gambler. Perhaps, shall we say, one step too far, so that his costume, which seems to be completely new, is over-garish."

A deep throated steamboat whistle sounded to the northwest of the mission, and the padre glanced at the gaunt man. "He must hurry to make it."

The tall man nodded and took out a

thick gold watch. "The *Argo* is docking now and it waits only a moment for what few passengers land or go aboard at the Esplanade. And it is a good two miles from here to the dock, Padre."

"He may be there in time," Father Joseph said. "He has a fine horse under him."

"But tired," the tall man said. "He's come a long way from the lather on him, and fast."

The rider had seen the steamboat as he topped the ridge above the sea and he'd put heels to the gelding again, kicking him and talking, saying, "Got to make it, boy. And after that, you'll have a long rest. Perhaps almost a week. But now you must hurry."

The black gelding flattened out and flew, his broad chest heaving. And the man on him said, "Those damned tailors took too much time with this outlandish outfit." And he glanced down at the plaid vest of the brightest combinations a man could wear and he cursed again, saying, "Craziest idea, letting the tailor have his choice without seeing the colors myself. I didn't tell him I wished to look like a clown. I merely mentioned in my note that I must look undeniably the gambler."

They were racing down the long slope towards the dock when the steamboat blew a blast on the whistle. He saw the steam go up beside the tall stack with the fancy iron flare on top. The paddle wheels were churning at the sides, bringing the steamer in. And yet there was more than a mile for him to go.

Now a clump of trees hid the steamboat as it swung in, but it wouldn't be a minute before it would be moving on again. A small band was playing on the after deck of the steamer. Around the edge of the trees he could barely see the name *ARGO* in gold letters across the stern of the boat.

They swung on the turn, took it full tilt as the steamboat whistled for departure, and came racing into view of the *Argo* as

the small passenger gangplank was pulled board.

"Hold it," the man shouted. "Hold that boat. I want to come aboard."

He was cursing as he called. Cursing to himself for all the racket he was making. He'd planned to come aboard without making such a commotion. What he sought would best be achieved quietly.

The black charged to a rearing stop at the dock edge and the rider leaped from his back, ran down the dock. There was a chance to get aboard. There were ten, fifteen feet of water to jump with the paddle wheels churning and the boat pulling away swiftly, picking up speed.

He leaped, his black boots struck the edge of the deck and he caught hold of the rail. A crewman caught his arm and drew him over the edge and looked him over.

"Thank you," the man said and went quickly inside the cabin.

He stood by the half-open window of the wash room, watching the shore recede from view, feeling the thump of the steam engines and the thud of the paddle fins on the great water wheels. It would be good to wait here for a time, for a long time, until the passengers and the crew as well had a chance to forget a little the urgency with which he'd come aboard.

He took one of the long, straight, thin stogies from the breast pocket of his coat, bit off the end and struck a light. After a while a small, wiry man came in, smelling of whiskey in a rather nice way, and brushing his brocaded vest with long, flexible fingers.

"THAT was a good jump, friend," he said. "But you needn't have hurried so much."

The other turned. "Why, may I ask?"

"Driscoll's my name," the stranger said. He drew back his long coat front and then hooked his thumbs in the tops of his gray striped trousers. The movement showed an ebony handled derringer with

the short, thick single barrel thrust in his trousers. "Cato Driscoll," he said, coolly. "You may have heard the name if you've played these waters, sir."

The other shook his head slowly. "No, I'm afraid I haven't." He wasn't a good liar. "But I'm happy to meet you, Mr. Driscoll."

"Perhaps," Driscoll said. "Your clothes are familiar, sir. But I don't recollect your name."

The man hesitated a split second, then, "Stevens," he said and again he wasn't a good liar.

Driscoll looked sharply at him. His flashing eyes seemed to take in everything and then double check what he saw.

"I take for granted that you and I are on the *Argo* for the same purpose. Am I right?"

"I'm afraid you've confused me with someone else," Stevens said. Silently he cursed the tailors who had made his outfit so obvious.

Driscoll walked closer. "We may as well be frank. I'm a gambler with certain rights on the *Argo*. In short, sir, this is my boat for gambling purposes, and I serve you notice not to interfere. Do we understand one another?"

"One point," Stevens said. "Suppose I call tables to you? A man must have a little pleasure for pastime on boat passage. I might join you at your table, if you'd permit me, when I take the notion."

Driscoll's small, flashing narrowed. He almost smiled. "That's a queer one, Stevens," he said. "And you're a queer one for the profession." Driscoll laughed then, outright. "Join me at my table any time you wish. The more the merrier, sir. Shall we go above?"

Stevens nodded. There wasn't any special reason that he knew of for staying down now. They walked back toward the band. A young man, handsome, debonair and tall, was coming from the after deck. Stevens glanced at him and away. He'd

seen him a couple of times in the San Francisco office of his father's firm, where Stevens was vice president. The boy had been east at college until a month ago when he'd come to enter the business. He'd gotten into gambling trouble twice in the east. Old John Oliver Colton hadn't been fooled. He'd kept him out, traveling to the mines of the firm, trying him out, trusting him a little at a time, trying to make him a man. And now he was headed for their Eureka Mines up the coast with twenty-thousand dollars in currency to close a deal and the man who called himself Stevens had come along to test him—to see that no great harm came to young Dave Colton.

They passed close and Cato Driscoll was on that side as they passed. And the sign was evident. He turned behind young Dave Colton and came up with a ten-dollar note from the deck and called. "I say, did you drop this, young man?"

Dave turned. He looked at Stevens and at Driscoll holding the ten spot at him and smiling. He said, "I don't believe so, but—"

"I'm sure it's yours," Driscoll said. "It fluttered down right behind you, sir." And they discussed it, pleasantly, and Mr. Colton met Mr. Stevens and Driscoll introduced himself and the trip looked very gay.

"Beautiful voyage," Driscoll said. "I've made it many times. Have mining interests up the coast at Eureka Mines."

"How the devil did he know?" Stevens asked himself. But then he had only to revert to his own past, in the halls and parlors of Atlanta and Charleston and Washington recall how one learned so much about those prominent or wealthy people who would surely be in the audience to watch the smoothest card manipulator in the east. For Driscoll could learn the passengers by checking the list and investigating the addresses given and then further to learn what cash might be carried.

Stevens smiled a little for the first time since coming aboard. He smiled, but only for an instant, then the band was playing and a girl with a clear familiar voice was singing. A girl that he could not see. A girl that he didn't need to see.

BELLE BALLARD, his memory said, and instantly his pulse beat a double tempo to the music that she sang and for a moment his breath was short and he felt a sudden tightness in his throat and a fullness of delight inside him. And he looked back, down ten long years, since those days when his act and hers had entertained the rich of the southland, before she'd vanished completely.

He took a step toward the band and the singing girl and then he stopped. Not that he hadn't been looking for Belle, to ask her why she'd run out, why she'd disappeared so completely and never even written him. But he couldn't go to her now. Later, perhaps, but not now. She'd recognize him as Steven Scott and then Dave Colton, would recognize his name as part of his father's firm and the whole job would be ruined.

He'd thought when old John Oliver had asked him to do the job because of his skill with cards, that it was silly. But now when he saw the kid with the gambler, Driscoll, it was something else again. He was a good kid who needed a hard lesson. And it wouldn't be long before he could finish that job and then go to Belle and tell her how he'd missed her—how he'd always felt.

"Care to meet the young lady?" Cato Driscoll said, reading his thoughts in part.

Stevens shook his head and smiled a twisted smile. "Women aren't my weakness," he said. "I had quite a ride, catching the packet. If you don't mind I'll take a nap in my stateroom."

When he went below he took out a deck of cards and exercised his hands on them,

and stayed in his stateroom until it was time to begin a game. Then he went straight to the bar and ordered whiskey. And when he had downed two, he turned to the game tables.

CATO DRISCOLL, sitting in the big chair with his back to the corner, was at the large card table. An elderly, bearded man was on Driscoll's right—and Dave Colton was on Driscoll's left.

There was room for two more chairs about the table but there was only one there, across from Driscoll.

Stevens sauntered over, bowed. "Mind if I sit in, gentlemen?"

The bearded man bowed. Dave Colton looked him over and nodded. Cato Driscoll nodded his head slowly, keeping his eyes on Stevens. "Always glad to have company."

Colton and the bearded man looked at Stevens's loud vest. He drew his coat closer about him and cursed inwardly. He bought his chips at the bar and came back, leisurely. "Go right ahead with the present hand. I'll sit in for the next."

It was an easy game to start. Stakes were low. A nice, friendly little game, it seemed. They played on and Driscoll raised a little as the drinks came more plentifully. Driscoll didn't do much cheating. Stevens caught him only twice in the first three hours of play.

Now and then the band music from the moonlit after-deck drifted back into the smoke filled room. And now and then came the voice of Belle Ballard, singing the songs she used to sing.

The winnings came and went with Stevens. He bought another stack to make it look good and he kept saying, quietly, "My luck's got to change," and watching Colton's pile. Twice the handsome kid of Old John Oliver had to go to get more chips. The stakes rose gradually. Dave Colton was playing tight and getting drunker. His eyes glowed suddenly and

he said, "This is my last hand, win or lose."

Stevens wanted to say, "Good boy," but it was up to the kid. Stevens watched Driscoll, who laid down his hand, "You can have it," he said in a poor attempt to keep the kid in.

The bearded man laid down his cards, and left.

"Let's see," Stevens said. "You're about four thousand in the hole, aren't you son?"

The kid nodded. Stevens decided he'd let him win and see if there was enough strength in the kid to leave when he was winning. "Three tens," Stevens said, showing part of his full house. The kid ate it up hungrily, and stayed. He lost soon after and got up.

"That's two thousand extra you owe me," Driscoll told the kid. "You want to pay me or borrow more and see if you can win it back."

Colton's face was flushed. He downed another drink and got up unsteadily. "I've got more," he said thickly. "I'll be back."

Stevens cursed inside. He said, "A hand while he's gone, Driscoll?"

"Anything," Driscoll said, "and I might say you've got me stumped, friend. You don't play like a gambling man."

"Luck's been running against me," Stevens said. "It's bound to turn soon."

"I'm beginning to think that rig you're wearing is a fake front," Driscoll said. "You're no tinhorn. Why didn't you admit it?"

Stevens didn't answer. He dealt the cards and won a good pot. Colton came back to the game with a stack of currency beside him. The stakes went up. The kid played like a fool. Stevens was going to work, but so was Driscoll. He palmed an ace, took a pair off the bottom of the deck, cut an ace out of the middle. Stevens knew what to look for. He wasn't difficult to catch when you knew what moves to watch for.

But Stevens's stack was coming up as

the kid's went down. And little drops of sweat oozed out on Cato Driscoll's forehead.

Steven's hands were working smoothly. He began to manipulate things his way more and more as the kid lost in larger amounts.

The sweat was standing out on Driscoll's face now. He watched every move that Stevens made, couldn't find a thing out of place.

"Go on to bed, kid," Stevens said to Colton. "You're too drunk to play cards." He'd lost over twelve thousand already.

Colton shook his head. "I got more," he said. "I got plenty more. And I'll show you who's too drunk to—"

Stevens groaned, but resigned himself to the inevitable. The kid went to get the rest of his money.

A soft voice sounded in the bar and it said, "What's wrong, Cato? You look terrible."

Stevens froze. It was no time for Belle Ballard to come in. He sat studying the cards in his hand, and felt her standing there behind him.

"Go away, Belle," Driscoll said.

"Is that nice?" Belle said. "I'll bet your friend wouldn't order me away."

There wasn't anything more to do about it. Steve Scott raised his head slowly. Might as well get it over with. And he felt a hand on his shoulder. "Hello, handsome," Belle said. "You wouldn't send me away, would you—" and then she stopped as she recognized him. They stared at each other for a split second and then she laughed and turned and left.

When she had gone, Driscoll said, "What's the matter with her? I never saw her drunk before."

Steve didn't answer. He was still studying his cards. "Play up," he said. "How many?"

He lost a small pot and the kid came back with another pile of currency and sat down again and they played on. The heaps

dwindled in front of the kid and before Driscoll, and mounted before Scott.

The kid went broke and staggered to his stateroom. Driscoll and Scott played on. The winnings went one way and the other, but mostly to Scott.

It was three in the morning when the gambler in the corner pushed back his chair. His face was ashen and his collar soaked. He said, "I thought I'd seen everything. I'm clean. And never in my life did I see a man with such luck."

Steve Scott went to his stateroom after he'd cashed in his winnings. He dropped on the bunk and worked his tired fingers. They'd been pretty stiff toward the last. It had been a good thing Driscoll had taken solace in whiskey toward the end of the game.

Quietly, Scott got up and put his coat back on. The steward was down at the end of the lounge, dozing. He asked for Belle Ballard's room.

There was a light burning in stateroom seventeen. He tapped at the door, and Belle stood in the light, fully dressed. She shut the door behind him. "I was sure you'd come," she said.

"You look more as if you were afraid I'd come," he said. "Why have you been hiding from me?"

SHE looked at him and her face was drawn and pale. "Was there any reason I shouldn't have run out on you, as you said, if I wanted to? I had a better offer here on the coast."

He studied her for a long moment. "Okay," he said. "You're lying, but if that's what you want me to believe, let's drop it."

"Tell me," she said and she dropped down on the edge of the bunk and nodded toward a chair for him. "What brought you here?"

"How close are you to Driscoll?" he said.

(Continued on page 126)

ONE GUN AGAINST

CHAPTER ONE

Blood at Gunstock Station

ROME WHITAKER spotted the fog-dimmed lights of Zack Quirk's place, at the Gunstock Crossing of Sevier River, caught the far, faint murmur of revelry and smiled as he put his pony down the dugway. Zack was notori-

ous as a collector of facts. Some of them he would sell . . . for a price.

Rome didn't know Zack Quirk and had no wish to, except for the man's contact with outlaws and crooks. An unprincipled Mormon apostate, Quirk had taken over Gunstock Station after it was abandoned by Overland Transportation, and turned it into a saloon, gambling resort and ren-

Hard-Hitting Epic



Gaynor lifted his derringer.

ONE GUN AGAINST

CHAPTER ONE

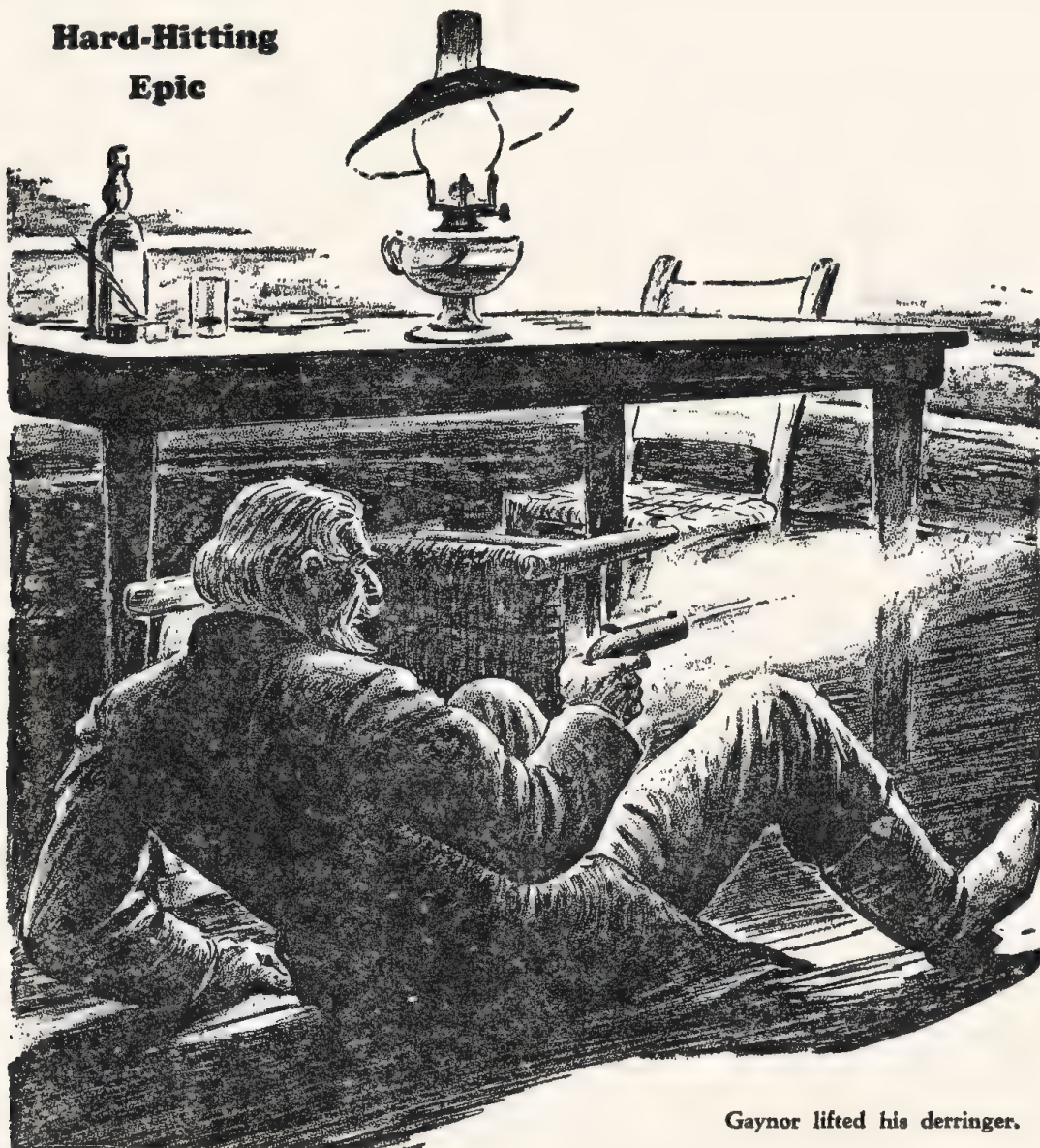
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HELL'S ANGELS

By HARRY F.
OLMSTED



For twelve bitter, hate-driven years Rome Whitaker hunted Wolf LeGore, bloody butcher of the Carthage Mormons. He found him at last . . . betrothed to the beautiful woman Rome could never have, allied with the man he had sworn to defend, and protected by a deadly legion of the frontier's most ruthless killers—the red-handed Angels of Hell!

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devious for scapegallows who'd undertake anything that smelled strong enough of loot.

Rome crossed Short Creek's shallow flow and climbed the far bank, halting as a horse whinnied in the willows. Rome dismounted, palmed his gun and listened. Then he tied his horse and glided through the timber.

He had no trouble locating the tied horse but, warily, took plenty time to make sure nobody was watching the animal. Only then did he dare strike a light. The pony was a splendid sorrel. There was nothing about the fancy, silver-trimmed bridle and full stamped Mexican saddle to indicate ownership nor hint at why the beast was tied two hundred yards from Quirk's.

Rome returned to his pony and rode toward the station. Ahead of him, a wagon rumbled, the kingbolt complaining as the rig was sharply cramped and backed. From cottonwoods shading the hitchracks, Rome peered into the gloom, watching the wagon back to a window. The driver jumped out and let the tailgate down. Heavy objects clumped into the wagon. The tailgate clicked shut and the driver rose to the box, sent the mules away. The window thudded down. Then sudden tumult exploded in the saloon—cursing, the smash of conflict, cries of pain.

Rome spurred ahead and looked through the opened door. Devil lights flamed in his eyes. Old excitements, old hungers, shook him. One man—a giant—stood off the charges of a dozen, his great fists pistoning, flooring his attackers, hurling them back. But slowly they were forcing him back to the bar.

Rome's muscles flexed and his tongue brushed his lips. Almost regretfully, he reined his horse about and cantered through settling dust after the wagon. Silently, he came up behind it, drew abreast. The driver turned startled. He started to say something, checked the

words and went for his gun. Rome quit the saddle, launched himself against the man, bore him struggling into the bed of the wagon. The fellow was strong as a bull. He made an effort to roll Rome under, failed. Rome's gun rose and fell. He got up, bracing himself. The mules were running away and Rome's pony was galloping alongside, its stirrups popping.

Making certain the driver was unconscious, Rome got down on the bobbing, swinging tongue, retrieved the lines. A moment later, safely back on the box, he was sawing the stampeding team to a bouncing halt.

Two riders came loping up through the gloom, splitting to put the wagon between them. Starlight glinted off the barrels of ready short guns. "Who's drivin'?" The challenge was sharp, peremptory.

"It's me!" Rome chuckled. "Ease off the trigger pull, Fiddler, and take these lines. You got a passenger that's sleeping. He wants off halfway to camp, an' try not to disturb his rest too much when you unload him. When you see what's in the wagon, you'll know what to do with it. I've got business back at the station."

The smaller of the two men grunted, spat tobacco juice and turned his pony over to his companion. Rome's whistle brought his horse and a moment later he was riding back under spur. Before Zack Quirk's place, he lit down and ran for the entrance, his gun in his hand. The drawing of that weapon pulled his lips into an ironic smile. Without a doubt, every man within a half mile of Gunstock Station wore a gun, including those whose savage battling filled Quirk's place with ugly echoes. Yet not one shot had been fired. No telling where one of the many trooper patrols was camped. Nobody wanted the cavalry sticking its nose into the picture, no matter what his own particular ambition might be. Rome had no intention of firing the piece he swung as a club when he cleared the threshold and hurled him-

self against those baying the big man at the bar.

Rome clubbed a man down, ducked his head and took a swung chair across the shoulders. The furniture splintered and Rome laid his gunsight into his attacker's face, smashing his nose and dropping him screaming. A gaunt, whiskered face, afire with hate, loomed before Rome. He drove his left fist into that face and, too late, saw the table leg lifting from the floor. He gave with the blow that took him alongside the head, felling him, jarring his senses. But even as he dropped, he kicked the burly man in the belly, doubling him up with agony.

Rome, on the floor and groggy, smashed at a little man who tried to cut his throat with an ugly belt knife. The blade missed narrowly and Rome slugged the fellow with the gun barrel. Rome got up, bludgeoning a way toward the giant who was sweeping an attacker off the bar and hurling him at his swarming foes. Spotting Rome coming to his aid, he grinned, bawled: "Better be good, pilgrim, if you hone to side Cinco Crossman."

Rome thought, *so this is Five-shot Crossman*, and rapped: "I am good." Crossman owned Desert Stage Lines—his coaches running between Bridger and Placerville. A ruthless man wringing his fortune from the hungers of lonely men, from their cries for mail, loved ones left behind, and safe delivery of hard-won gold. Having hated Crossman without knowing him, Rome marveled less that he fought for Crossman, more that so rich a man would fight his own battle. Thinking like that, Rome battered through to him.

UNABLE to keep these two battlers apart, the mob knew their cause was lost. They gave back, whirled and charged the door. Crossman laughed, began dragging the cripples to the door, heaving them out.

"Take your leavings, you scabby Angels

of Hell!" he bellowed. "And come back soon for more." He rubbed bruised knuckles, grinned at Rome and pounded the bar "Zack! Zack Quirk! Crawl out, you sheep-livered rabbit! Coast's clear and we're thirsty."

A door creaked open. Zack Quirk emerged, blue eyes flighty, pallid face flushed with humiliation. He tried to grin. "Bad bunch, gents. I . . . I feared for your lives."

"Hogwash!" snorted Five-shot. "You were afraid they wouldn't slit our weazins. You're no good, Quirk. You beg my business then welch on protecting it. If I hadn't happened along, they'd have run you under the bed and taken what freight I've stored here. . . ."

"But, Mister Crossman—" Zack set out bottle and glasses, trembling.

"Don't mister me, Quirk. I'm convinced you framed this rotten deal, partnering Wichita Briggs—a man I made, supported and trusted. Don't deny it. Except for this stranger, your back-stabbing Saints would have taken the California gold shipments stored here till the military situation clarifies in the north."

"What makes you thing they failed?" Rome asked.

Crossman eyed him narrowly, holding his drink untasted. "What'd you mean, mister? Never mind." He tossed off the liquor, strode into a back room. Rome saw him stoop to open a trap door, heard him shout. "Gone! Quirk, damn your crooked soul!"

He came charging out, caught the cringing saloonman and shook him cruelly. Getting only squalled denials, he dropped Quirk and lunged for Rome. Rome struck his hand down. "Try to paw me, Crossman, and you've hubbed yourself a fight."

Five-shot squared off, glowering. "How'd you know it was gone, unless. . . ?"

"Saw 'em loading it as I entered." Rome said nothing of his own part in the

affair. "What's Wichita Briggs like?"

"Tall, slim, dark. Favors dude shirts, California foxed pants, fancy boots. Misplaced eyebrows on his lip. That fit anybody you saw loading?"

"Perfect. And plainly not a type to be trusted. What ailed your judgement?"

Crossman gulped a drink, his smoky eyes twinkling. "I like you, fella. You're wild born and love a scrap if the's money in it. Fine. You earned it and I'll pay."

"Wait till I bill you," rapped Rome, "and don't hold your breath. You money-bags think your cash will buy a man's soul, but—"

"What soul?" sneered the big man. "You and your like learn a man has money and set out to bunko him. Like tonight. I'd fix Briggs pretty, paid him handsome, smiled when he sparked my daughter. Then he tips me off to my enemies and runs with sixty thousand of my money while I fight for my life!" He mopped sweat from his bruised face. "You should have stopped Wichita and earned big money. But I'll be generous; what's your price?"

Rome throttled his rage, wondering why Crossman's smugness roiled him so, why he refused the offer of money. Maybe because Fiddler Potts and Wryneck Speakman were at camp with Crossman's sixty thousand—pay enough. "Price, Crossman? Another drink. And now forget it."

"You're worth a lot to my lines, neighbor."

"I hate work," grinned Rome. "Besides, I'm too busy."

"Doing what? Something honest?" Crossman's eyes revealed what he was thinking. The California Trail was menaced everywhere by desperadoes and highwaymen eager to knock over a Crossman shipment, scouts of the self-styled Army of Saints who deemed no thing a crime if it provided arms and ammunition to repel the ever encroaching troopers of the U. S.

Army. Crossman waited for an answer.

"Honesty," said Rome, "is a point of view. I'm Rome Whitaker and, far as I know, there's nobody gunning for me."

"Whitaker . . . humph. Must be crowding twenty-eight, yet I haven't heard of you. When I was your age, I'd already made a name for myself."

"I'm looking for a chance," grinned Rome.

"Yeah? All right, maybe I can accommodate you . . . tonight. Wichita was guarding my interests here and I figured, when I came down here, to spend the night with him. I'd be a damn fool to stay here now, and a worse one to ride the trail back alone. How about siding me to my ranch, out of Mayfield? Name your own price."

"You're sweating to get rid of money," mocked Rome. "To hell with your money, Crossman. I'll tag along for the fun."

ZACK QUIRK made no mention of payment for the drinks, nor did he speak a farewell as Crossman led the way out. His face remained passive but his eyes held the sly look of an animal that has been trapped but escaped at exactly the right moment. "Lord it over me, Five-shot," he muttered. "Strut while you can. Your number's comin' up . . . an' soon."

Outside, with the soft river breeze fanning them, Crossman and Rome got their horses. The fine sorrel, tied deep in the willows, belonged to Wichita, according to Five-shot. As they lined out northward, across Short Creek and up the dugway, Crossman talked about that horse.

"Wichita can't escape," Crossman said. "If my drivers don't spot him and tip me off, other drivers will. I'll send the word out along every stageline in the west. I'll have that sneaky whelp dragged back here and. . . ."

Rome, who knew the truth about Wichita and dared not speak it, rode with

his hand on his gun and his eyes probing the shadowy turns up ahead. Fiddler and Wryneck had dumped the man out, not too far along the trail. Wichita might still be sleeping, but that was most unlikely. He was probably on his way down to his horse, nursing a headache and a desire for revenge. And if Fiddler and Wryneck had been as lax about searching for a weapon as he'd been. . . . "If they didn't think to get his gun. . . ."

"Think to get whose gun?" Crossman turned in his saddle.

It was Rome's first hint that he had spoken his thoughts. "Personal business of my own," he said lamely, and knew it wouldn't do. Crossman was suspicious, staring at Rome. Returning that look, his insides knotted with stubborn antagonism, Rome saw that little flash of warning up ahead—the glint of starlight on steel. "Look out!" he barked, and went to the withers. "Down, Crossman!"

"Rein in!" came the harsh call from the thicket ahead. "Hands up!"

Crossman, a magnificent horseman, bent low and sank the steel. Rome shot past him and his gun was in his hand, spitting slugs at the gunflash. A bullet zipped over his head. A yelp of pain came from the thicket, a rattle of stones and crackling of brush as a man dove down the sides of a brushy barranca. Crossman was in action now, spraying the thicket. Rome halted him.

"Cut it out! Hold everything! Listen a minute!"

Silence fell, then the sound of movement through brittle brush came up to them. Crossman was cursing, shaking the last bullet from his gun, rolling his spurs as he tried to shove his horse into the tangled undergrowth. He was wild, and Rome could now believe the popular legend that Five-shot never forgave an injury, never rested till he had run down a transgressor.

Unable to force his horse to the im-

possible task, Crossman came back, cursing bitterly. "Dirty bushwhacker! I think I winged him. He'll have to come out somewhere along the Sevier. I'm going down there and lay for him."

"And run into an ambush," said Rome. "You better let him go and give thanks."

"Anxious to let him get away, eh?" Crossman let the sneer into his voice again. "You said something about *if they didn't think to get his gun*. What is this?"

"What I said was my business, Crossman. This is yours. Don't tell me you didn't recognize that voice."

"Wichita. And on foot! What's he doing here?"

"From the sound of his gun, I'd say he was out to polish you off, Crossman. Maybe he thinks with you dead, he'll be running Desert Lines."

"He'll be running the Devil's stage lines," gritted Crossman. "I'm going after him." He whirled his horse, spurred it a few jumps down the trail and reined it in. "What's that?" The echoes of bugle notes ran sharply along the headlands to the north. From the south came an answering call. "Troopers! They'll come a-whooping to learn what all the shootin's about."

"Maybe we better do like Wichita and take to the brush."

"Hogwash! I know a lot of those boys. They're doing a hated job and doing it the best they know how. They're on my side. We'll meet 'em and get 'em to looking for Wichita." He spurred to the top of the rise and drew rein, waiting.

THE troopers—a squad—came racing up the slope. Guns glittered as they spotted the two silent horsemen. The army men split, three swinging to one side, three to the other. The corporal rode straight ahead, his gun on the mounted pair awaiting him. "Get the hands up, you two! Close in on them men and shoot at the first hostile sign."

"That you, Corporal Borran? This is Cinco Crossman. Nothing here to worry you."

His words failed to reassure Corporal Joe Borran, C Troop, General Albert Sydney Johnston's Army of the West. "Crossman, eh?" He paused before them, his gun twitching nervously from one to the other. "More night skullduggary, eh Crossman? What was it, a falling out among thieves?"

"Now, Corporal, I take that right unkindly."

"Yeah? What were you shooting at?"

"The stars, Corporal." Crossman's tone was contrite. "Took on a few more drinks than we should have, back at Quirk's. Owl started hooting at us and. . ."

"Likely yarn, Crossman! Who's that with you? Wichita Briggs?"

"Last I saw of Wichita he was at the station, Corporal. This is Rome Whitaker, a good egg and one I can vouch for."

"Your voucher ain't worth a plugged centavo, Crossman. Get off your horses, both of you!"

"What's the idea, Borran?" A note of rancor crept into Cinco Crossman's voice.

"The idea's this, Crossman. Too many supplies are getting to Brigham's Mormon army, too many guns and cartridges. Every man along this trail whose business lends itself to helping the rebels is under suspicion. Step down! Murphy, you disarm them. Thomas, McGuire, search them. Pollet, stir up a fire so we can see what's going on."

"What'd you expect?" rapped Crossman. "You think we're carryin' guns for the Saints in our red flannels?"

"Shut up, Crossman. Keep those hands up, Whitaker!"

Flame licked up through piled brush and juniper limbs, its glow revealing the grim and ruthless line of Rome's mouth. Too late, he realized the menace of this search. He could still break for freedom,

but men would die. He vetoed the idea, grimacing as they jerked his gun and began the search. Borran stood aloof, gun still in his hand, watching the procedure with a face cold as granite.

"Clean as a tooth," reported McGuire, who had made a search of Crossman's pockets. "Money belt with gold cash. Pocket full of cigars mashed to kindling. Couple of letters, one from the keeper of the Honey Creek Station, asking for hay and grain, one from General Johnston in regards to stage drivers reporting the movement of all wagons, north and south. Like the other one, he's bruised and skinned up, fresh and recent."

"No Mormon money?" asked Borran.

"Nary a Brigham shinplaster."

"That's all, Crossman. Get back to your ranch and stay there nights if you don't want honest men to suspicion you. Thomas, what'd you find on Whitaker?"

"Poor as Job's turkey, Corporal. Pipe, plug and jackknife. Few coins, all legitimate. No papers. No Mormon currency."

"Get on your horse, Whitaker," barked Crossman, sullen and resentful. "I can't wait to ride where the air's better than it is here."

Borran's face bleakened. "Both you men have been up to some devilment. I hate to let you go, knowing that shooting can mean dead men, but without evidence, my hands are tied. Whitaker, you stick to steady ranch work with Crossman and keep off this trail at night. I warn you both; if I find bodies in this brush come daylight, I'll have you both squirming on the hot pan. Get going."

ROME heaved a sigh of relief, turned to Murphy who had just returned Crossman's gun. He stood looking at Rome with a queer little smile crinkling the corners of his mouth, a glitter in his dark eyes. When Rome held out his hand for his gun, the trooper sprayed his palm with tobacco juice.

Infuriated, Rome drove the fouled palm into the man's face, followed in with his fists pistoning blows to face and belly. Murphy struck him with his own gun, knocking him to his knees, stunning him. Murphy, spewing fighting Irish profanity, leaping in with upraised weapon, was borne back by Pollet and Thomas. McGuire fell upon Rome, securing his arms. Crossman was bawling savage protests. Corporal Borran raged, shouting confused orders.

"Murphy!" thundered the corporal, when a semblance of order had been restored. "Explain your action or explain to a court martial at Fort Douglas. Why did you spit on Whitaker?"

"Shur-r-re, and Oi lost me head, sor," brogued the Celt, remorsefully. "Knowin' the spalpeen was the murderer av a fri'nd av moine, Oi did well, be jabers, not to bullet 'im befor-r-re yer oies, sor."

"Murder, Murphy? Whitaker murdered a friend of yours? Who?"

"The man's stark, raving crazy," barked Crossman, with a long look at Rome's strained face.

"Crazy, is it?" yelped Murphy, brandishing the pistol. "Shure an' Oi'll be afther makin' yuh eat thim wor-r-rds, me bye. Corporal, many's the toime Oi've seen this gun hangin' at the side av me for-r-mer corporal—Ben Fullenwider! Look!" He traced a pattern on the barrel. "B. F. 'tis punched here. A good soldier, reported AWOL, lyin' stark an' stiff for the buzzards, and these night-crawlin' spalpeens murdered him!"

"Crossman . . . halt!" Borran flung around, his gun leveling against the shape of Cinco Crossman, who spurred away into the night. "Murphy . . . look out!" His gun spat, but the fire was dying out and the swift-moving target was elusive in the darkness. The corporal's warning to Murphy came too late as Rome leaped at him, swinging. His right crashed off Murphy's jaw, knocking him down. Rome

went down with him, carrying him over and over with the momentum of his dive. He got the hand that held Ben Fullenwider's gun, but stubborn Irish fingers held tight. Rome twisted the hand. Murphy cried out with the pain. Then Rome, having only a step or two to take, was smashing brush in the steep-sided canyon that had sheltered Wichita. Bullets were clipping the brush over his head. He gripped Fullenwider's gun as he ran.

CHAPTER TWO

Table Stakes

DAWN streaked the eastern sky when Rome answered the challenge. "Whitaker!"

"Big Mister!" That was Wryneck. "By damn, Fiddler, he made 'er." He emerged from the brush and took one look. "Holy smokes, you tangle with a wildcat?"

Rome sat his saddle, tired, hungry, grinning down at them. Neither was old in years, yet the wisdom of age shone from their eyes. Fiddler, christened Abel Josiah Potts, was a stringy man with watery eyes, sun-bleached hair and a gaunt face seamed by bitterness and bronzed by sun and wind. Wryneck, heavy and powerful, looked on life through humor-bright eyes. An old neck injury caused his head to roll grotesquely when he was excited. He never tanned and his skin was white compared to Fiddler's swarthinness.

"I've been to Zack's den of iniquity," Rome said dryly.

Fiddler bridled. "That snake had you beat up? I'll. . ."

"Forget it, Fiddler. Yankee patrols stop everybody who could be a gun runner. How's Ben?"

"Showin' some life," grinned Fiddler. "Even cussin' me now. He'll live."

"That wound," offered Wryneck, "may make him the man his pappy was. Helped

a little by a pizelm club." He flexed powerful fingers. "Take his pony, Fid. I'll wrangle breakfast."

Rome dismounted, gave Fiddler his horse and moved to the blanketed man on the pallet, behind the willow screen. Ben Fullenwider's eyes were closed, his breathing faint. His pallor spoke of his grim battle against death. He opened purplish eyes and his lips pulled down as he spoke.

"Found somebody you couldn't bully, eh? Hope he beat hell out of you."

"Lost hope, Ben. Me and Crossman whipped Wichita's gundogs, at Zack's. For culls, they didn't do bad, up to the time they took it on the run."

"Wichita fighting Crossman?" Ben scoffed. "Think I'm a fool to believe that?"

"Sounds cockeyed," admitted Rome. "But Wichita left Cinco battling for life and ran off with sixty thousand he was guarding for Crossman."

"Cagey Five-shot," laughed Ben. "He fixed that to convince interested parties he and Wichita *had* split. I'll bet there was no shooting, only a bogus rough and tumble at Crossman's orders, while Wichita got the gold dust out safely. You and other trail wolves fell for an old one, Whitaker."

"That's possible." Rome shrugged. "There was no shooting, mainly so as not to draw Cap Hampton's troop—now camped within earshot. Whatever Wichita's game, it backfired. He hadn't gone a mile when he was jumped and robbed of the gold."

"You seem to know a lot 'about it, Rome."

"Sure. Wichita bushwhacked me and Cinco, as we rode north. He missed. We ran him down a gulch. Luckily, it was Corporal Borran's patrol that reached us. They found your gun on me. I knocked over a few getting away. Army wants me now . . . for your murder."

"I'd like to see you hung, Rome," said

Ben, "but not bad enough to die for it. I'm obliged for your care, but now I'm strong enough to ride. Fetch me my gun and horse and I'll ride."

Rome grinned, beckoned to Wryneck and Fiddler. "Boys," he said. "I've told Ben he ain't a mite of trouble, but he insists on pulling out. What you think? Should he face trail dangers, weak and friendless as he is?"

"Good riddance," growled Wryneck.

"I like this camp," countered Fiddler. "I couldn't trust 'im not to turn us in."

ROME smiled. "I feel the same, yet I'm trusting him. He's officially AWOL, considered dead. He's much better here than facing court martial. I'd like to help, little as he'll believe me. Where you bound when you leave us, Ben?"

"To Cap Hampton, to drop the hint his gun-running troubles begin and end with you three."

"Too bad," mourned Rome. "How can a man so plumb stubborn be helped any, Fiddler?"

"Except for memory of his pappy, he could go hang," glowered Fiddler. "T'other day, on the Starvation Trail, I nabbed a messenger. He give up head an' papers. While the cavalry chases shadders, Crossman's stages unload guns at Fish Crick."

"That's a damned lie!" sneered Ben. "Tell some more, Fiddler."

Rome snapped, "You knew about this, Ben, but you'd peddled your honor for Julane Crossman's kiss and her dad's promises. You double-crossed your saddlemates. Reasons enough, maybe, for a bullet, don't you think? Go on, Fiddler."

Potts leered at the angry trooper. "My messenger told me interestin' things about this gun runnin'. Seems the arms ain't to be used by Brigham against Yankees, but by Jack Mormons against the Saints. . . ."

"Hogwash!" Ben's denial lacked force.

"If that's hogwash," stressed Rome, "and the guns do go to Brigham, then you are a traitor. This is war, you know!"

Stung to the quick, Ben tried to rise. Wryneck held him down. He was white, trembling. "Smart boy, ain't you?" he jeered. "I'd make you eat those words if Wichita hadn't shot me. . . ."

"You said it was a dark night. How you know it was Wichita?"

"Who else would it be? I took his girl. I whipped him good, at Quirk's place. He shot me, all right, and I'll pay him off. Then I'll marry Julane, lie doggo, and when the sign is right—clear my name."

"Fat chance, Ben." Rome's eyes were grin. "You won't stir from this camp till we say so. When I learn about the next contraband leaving Fish Creek, I'm putting a gun in your hand. You'll get your chance to capture the shipment and turn it over to Cap Hampton. It may lose you your girl but it should make quite an impression on the officers of a court martial."

"Have your own gun loose when you hand me one," warned Ben.

"Shut up!" Fiddler tendered a paper. "Taken this off the messenger, Rome."

Rome scanned writing addressed to "Jared" and signed, "Five." "Get well, Ben," he said. "More guns from Mister Five to Mister Jared, Saturday night. Five is Cinco, but who's Jared?"

"Find out!" scoffed Ben.

"Jared Gaynor," said Fiddler. "Commanding Angels of Abraham—called Angels of Hell By Brigham."

Angels of Hell! Crossman had thundered those words at the rag-tag crew he'd smashed at Quirk's. Why should he fight those he supplied with arms? Why should they chance cancellation by fighting him? The answer was the treachery of Wichita Briggs. Cinco was in desperate danger!

This puzzlement was another in a long line. Fourteen years ago, Rome had experienced the terrors of religious intolerance. Mormon properties burned! Mor-

mon leaders lynched at Carthage jail! An eleven year conflict between Mormons and Gentiles had left Rome untouched until Wolf LeGore organized his "Mobbers" to drive the Saints from Illinois. Rome would carry the awful pictures of those consuming hatreds to his grave.

ROME recalled his stern sire feeding fleeing woman and children, thundering tirades against pursuing Mobbers. After half an hour of unleashed horror, Mobbers and refugees were gone. So was John Whitaker. His bullet-riddled body dangled from his own dooryard mulberry.

Harvey Speakman, a neighbor, was shot to death by the same mob, his son Perry hung, their home burned. All because the Speakmans had quartered refugees on a leaky houseboat on the river. Perry was cut down and lived. But his neck was injured and he became Wryneck.

Across the road from the Whitaker farm stood Colonel Peter Fullenwider's big white house. This retired army man, who bragged that his young boy was a drummer in the service, a chip off the old block, took down his musket and halted the gang marching refugees from the Whitaker place. While demanding they surrender tired woman and squawling babies, he was shot dead. Abel Potts, his hired man, was riddled rushing to his aid.

Potts recovered and became a wanderer who came and went mysteriously, playing his fiddle for his keep. He was branded harmlessly crazy, and shunned. When he came to leave the country, he begged Rome and Wryneck to accompany him. "You boys lost dads," he reminded them. "I lost a fine boss an' my health. I'm tailing the gent who led the killing Mobbers. If you two would like to be in on the kill. . . ."

Wryneck, sensitive about his affliction, went along. Rome, an only son and needed at home, refused. Twelve years later, his

mother dead and the place sold, Rome met Wryneck who had returned on a visit, heard his yarns and went to Utah with him. Now, with the Mormons at war again, Rome, Wryneck and Fiddler took time from their Sanpitch Mountain claims to resume their interrupted quest.

"Who are we looking for?" Rome had asked, time and again. Wryneck always shook his head. He didn't know. Fiddler smiled knowingly, his eyes misty.

"I won't tell, pardner, till I've killed the skunk. I don't want that you should nail him first. Stand your hand! You'll know directly."

Rome asked it again, as he sat there with his partners and Ben—the son of valiant Colonel Peter Fullenwider. Fiddler looked at Ben, pursed his lips and shook his head, jabbing his finger at the skillet and coffeepot. "Better dig in, boy, before the camp robbers get it."

Rome was thoughtful as he ate. When he finished, he felt like stretching out and sleeping. He had enjoyed little rest in three days. "I did a small favor for Crossman," he told Fiddler, grinning. "I don't think I should lose any time getting to his ranch and cashing in on his gratitude. I'll try to be there representing Cinco, Saturday night. While I'm at the ranch, I'll try to see Julane and tell her about Ben. No matter what he is, she's apparently in love with him and. . ."

"Not so fast, Rome." Fiddler produced another paper. "Here's the other letter my Jack Mormon courier was carryin' to Jared Gaynor. Read it an' you mayn't feel quite so sentimental about Ben an' the Crossman filly."

This letter, unlike the first one, was couched in formal language.

*Gen. Jared Gaynor,
Field Hdqrs, Army of Abraham,
Wasatch District, Utah.*

Sir: - I have the honor to acknowl-

edge your favor of the 5th instant, wherein you offer me the sole transportation franchise across Utah, upon the successful termination of your campaign against Deseret. I accept the price. Having placed your proposal before Miss Julane Crossman and obtained her consent, I herewith advise you that you are, upon receipt of this writing, betrothed to my daughter. I have, Sir, with highest respect, the honor of subscribing myself

*Your obedient servant,
Prothro G. Crossman.
Black Bull Ranch
Maryfield, Utah*

Rome's eyes were glittering when he lifted them. "Now that is really a letter," he murmured. "What you thinking, Fiddler?"

Fiddler grimaced. "Crossman never was a man to ask odds. He controls transportation now, makin' good where other men have dropped money an' failed. He has a paying ranch an', to my knowledge, silver claims that can't help but make him rich once there's peace. Why should a man like that stoop to runnin' guns to low-life revolutionaries? Why should a man swap his only daughter to a sheepherder callin' hisself a general, for a concession based on said sheepherder beatin' a strong man like Brigham?"

Fiddler seldom let his temper get away, but it was straining its leash now. Rome wondered why. "A man will do strange things when he's got a pistol at his head. Even a brave man who knows that need-less dying will play right into the enemy's hands. Good work, Fiddler. I don't know where this is leading us, but I'm staking everything that you do. Anyhow, it's fun while it lasts. If anybody asks for me, tell 'em I'm riding ridgelines. *Adios.*"

He winked, touched his animal and rode away. Soon the brush swallowed him.

CHAPTER THREE

Prisoner at Black Bull Ranch

TRAVELING remote and roundabout trails, Rome Whitaker avoided army patrols as he made his way north. The sun had set and a purple haze was settling into the rincons when he dropped off the mesa overlooking Black Bull Ranch. It was a pleasant place. Open fields stretched along the watercourse, dotted with oaks, horses and fat cattle. The house, a sprawling log affair, looked four ways from a rounding lift. Its chinks were pierced with gun loops and its outer walls were pitted and pocked with bullets—all reminders of a day when such an outpost had to be a fort or fall to the ravaging Utes.

Stables and barns and outbuildings lay at the foot of the eminence and Rome rode between them unchallenged. He saw nobody, sensed an absence of people here. It was the same at the house when he dismounted, trailed the rein and strode to the door. His repeated knocking echoed hollowly, bringing no response. Convinced finally that there was nobody at home, thinking it strange there would not at least be a servant or a retainer about the place, Rome turned back to his horse. It was gone.

Thinking the beast had moved from his sight around the corner of the house, Rome strode forward. The animal was not in sight. Hoofbeats behind him drew him around. Three riders came swiftly toward him, riding stirrup to stirrup. Each had a leveled six-shooter in his hand. Their lips were pressed into a straight, grim line and their eyes were bleak. They spoke no word and their intent being plainly hostile, Rome dropped his hand to his gun.

"Don't try it, mister! Take your hands from that gun or I'll kill you!"

A feminine voice, icy, threatening. Rome thought of Julane Crossman as he lifted

his hands, and he knew the guess to be right when he slowly turned to look at her. Silent in beaded Indian mocassins, she had stepped from a side door and now stood poised on the stoop, glaring over her dangerously steady pistol. A wide black hat hung by a chinstrap over her yellow curls. Her fringed and quilled buckskins were clean and perfectly fitted.

Something about Cinco Crossman's daughter made Rome forget his danger. It wasn't that she was beautiful. The sun had freckled her cheeks. Her nose turned up a little too sharply. Her jaw was a bit too rugged, her mouth too grim. Yet it was a wholesome, fetching picture she made and Rome, admiring her, grinned as her men dismounted, lifted his gun from holster and took him by the arms, one on either side, with the third one holding a gun at his spine.

"Fine western hospitality, lady," Rome grinned. "Crossman invites me to his ranch, and a beautiful girl immediately throws me under the gun. If you've got confidence enough in that gun of yours, I'll thank you to tell this wolf to get his muzzle out of my ribs. It tickles."

"It won't trouble you much longer," snapped the girl. "I'm seeing that you're delivered to Captain Hampton to hang."

"Hang? For what, ma'am?"

"For killing Corporal Joe Borran, of the Manti District Patrol. Word came in this afternoon to watch for you, after you shot your way out of their hands. The report said they had arrested you for having Ben Fullenwider's gun on you. Ben's been missing for ten days or more, which means you killed him too. I . . ." she bit her lip, "I was going to marry Ben."

She fell silent, fighting back strong emotion, and Rome looked at her without seeing her. This astonishing piece of information shook him. Riding far from the place of last-night's escape, he had heard the shot, so faint and far that it

caused him little concern. Wichita Briggs had fired that shot; Rome was sure of that. As sure as Ben Fullenwider was that Wichita had shot him. Rome marveled at the man's craftiness. Chancing capture, he had again secreted himself along the trail and with one shot had turned suspicion of his two murders against Rome.

One of the three had fetched a rope and was whipping hard knots about Rome's wrists. Another said, "We can save you the bother, ma'am. I've got a new rope that needs a mite of stretching."

"No!" she said, fiercely. "Lock him in the well house till father returns. I shall hold you each responsible." Proudful, confident they would obey her, she turned into the house. The three hirelings, muttering curses of disappointment, strong-armed Rome to the stone well house, shoving him, dragging him, hurling him into the damp, windowless interior and locking him in total blackness.

ROME knew his chances of escaping from this cell were hopeless. Yet the thought that every minute he spent here was a minute lost in his quest, and a minute nearer doom for the beautiful girl who had imprisoned him here, set him struggling against the numbing loops that bound his wrists behind him. Exhausted at last, he lay down against the wall and fell into a troubled sleep.

When Rome awoke, it was to the muted rumble of Cinco Crossman's voice. "The trouble with you, daughter," he was scolding, "is your hot temper and your way of acting first and thinking afterward. . . ."

"Both of which qualities I inherit from you!"

"Never mind that, Julane. You shouldn't have mistreated Whitaker. He did me a good turn last night, saved me a nice messing up and turned down all payment. A good fighting man and one I could profitably use. . . ."

"You're a fool, father. If he turned

down money, it was only because he figured on some gouge that would pay bigger."

"Nonsense." The key rattled in the padlock and the door swung. "You get more bitter and less trustful every year."

"She's right," spoke up Rome. "Anything you would have offered was chicken feed alongside your lost sixty thousand. That seemed pay enough for me."

Crossman started, like a man bullet struck. "You got that dust? By hell, I'd have sworn. . . ."

"It was Wichita, eh? It was. I took it away from him."

The big stageline man, stung by Julane's chuckles, scratched his head. "You're a cool one, Whitaker. Where's my sixty thousand now? And how'd you get the two letters my men took off you?"

"No answers," gritted Rome, "till you shuck me out of these ropes."

Julane lit a candle, set it on the rock coping. Cinco pulled the door to and removed the painful ropes. "I cussed my boys for this, Whitaker, but if you're into me for sixty thousand You plumb sure Wichita robbed me?"

"You said you were sure too," reminded Rome. "Zack Quirk passed the stuff outside. Wichita loaded it and drove off. I relieved him of the responsibility and gave it to a friend who's tending Ben Fullenwider. . . ."

"Ben!" gasped Julane. "He . . . he's alive . . . all right?"

"Alive and ornery. Bragging he'll marry you and run away from the charges deviling him. Me, I can't allow him to mess up his life in your dad's skullduggery. And I hate to see him playing second fiddle in love to Jared Gaynor. . . ."

"You talk crazy!" rapped Crossman. "Shut up!"

"Wait, dad! I must know what he means about Ben playing second fiddle. Make it plain, mister, or I'll horsewhip it out of you." She shook out her looped

quirt. Rome grinned, envying Ben even while flinching under her temper.

"Show her the letters, Cinco."

"No!" Crossman's eyes were vindictive in the candle light. "I thought you'd be valuable here, Whitaker, but I was mistaken."

"Valuable?" Rome chafed his wrists. "Like Julane? Something to be sold for crooked dollars and rebel promises?"

Crossman glanced away, hiding the rage in his eyes. "You're talking yourself into bad trouble, Whitaker."

"Trouble?" Rome laughed. "I've known nothing else. They tell me you knew trouble during the Carthage blood bath. You were a Mormon then and the scars must be burned deep. Ever hear of John Whitaker?"

CROSSMAN'S sullen eyes fired. "Of course. Mormon leaders still talk about him, to whip up the people's courage when things look black. You're John's. . . .?"

"Son, Cinco. Do Mormon leaders mention Harvey Speakman? Or old Pete Fullenwider?"

"Both, Whitaker. Ben talked about those three Gentiles martyred with the Prophet. Why?"

"The sons of John Whitaker and Harvey Speakman are camped near Gunstock Crossing. With us is the wounded son of Colonel Pete, and Fiddler Potts a shirttail uncle of mine who knows the man we're hunting. Wolf LeGore, bloody Mobber boss!"

"LeGore!" Crossman snorted. "I don't believe there ever was a Wolf LeGore."

"Oh, yes there was, and is. And he had the gall to come West, hoping to further hamstring the Mormon movement. Fiddler followed him, trailing him twelve years without ever catching up."

"He's chasing shadows," sneered Crossman.

"Not Fiddler. He knows the man but

can't get near him. He refuses to tell me because he wants to kill LeGore himself. Easy-going Wryneck Speakman, who doesn't care who kills LeGore so long as it's done, gave me the name yesterday. He overheard Fiddler's sleep talk. That's why I came here, Cinco! To kill Wolf LeGore."

Julane gasped. "Are you hinting, Whitaker, that dad is Wolf LeGore?"

Rome chuckled. "Hardly, ma'am. Cinco's only bad skin-deep. LeGore's bad to the core. But, like the man who played with a polecat, Crossman's badly stunk up."

Cinco rasped. "You paw and beller, Whitaker, without saying anything. What you mean I'm stunk up? That I'm hobnobbing with LeGore?"

There was a faint grin on Rome's lips, but his eyes were like agates. "Worse than that, Cinco. On the promise of Wolf LeGore to give you an exclusive transportation franchise across Utah, once he's killed Brigham and nailed up the coffin of Mormonism, you pledged him your daughter in marriage. If I had a daughter like Julane and a rat like him even looked at her, I'd fill him so heavy with lead he'd sink in bull gravy."

He paused for breath. Julane was looking up into Cinco's poker face. "Dad, you didn't!"

Crossman threw an arm about her, drew her close. "Honey, you can believe as much or little of this man's yarn as you please. But please believe me—I've never spoken to Wolf LeGore, let alone pledge you to him in marriage. The idea is fantastic. If such a man looked twice at you, I'd kill him."

"And furthermore," Rome went on, doggedly, "you've violated the law for Wolf LeGore's gold—extorted from small miners, stolen gold wherever you could—running guns for LeGore. Wolf LeGore, despised even by the Mormon-haters of Illinois and Missouri, is Jared Gaynor!"

"You lie!" Crossman's bellow filled the well house. His temper snapped like an overtaxed wire. His great fist, lashing out from behind Julane, took Rome on the jaw, hurling him backward into the well shaft. Down, down, he fell, his senses flickering. The shock of icy water rallied him. He broke to the surface, paddling, gasping air, dragged down cruelly by soaked clothes and water-filled shoes. He looked up. The wellhouse was dark.

"Hey!" he cried, but empty echoes gave answer. He tried for hand and footholds. There were none. The shaft had been smoothly plastered from the waterline up. Already his body was chilling, growing sluggish.

ROME gave over the struggle and clung to the smooth sides of the shaft. The feeling was leaving his body. There was little buoyancy in him now. Soon his finger grip would fail and he would slip beneath the surface. That would be the end. How Crossman and Jared Gaynor would laugh. And Julane—would Julane laugh? She was a girl, and girls he had known were not heartless creatures who could leave a man to die in a well. Yet, she was a Crossman. . . .

His numbing fingers slipped. He went under, clawed his way up and filled his lungs. *For the last time*, he thought. He clung desperately, closing his eyes, content just to breathe. A murmur from above drew his lids open. Shadows danced on the wellhouse ceiling. He heard a girl's voice, urging speed; men answering her. They came to the well. A lantern clanged against the coping. Shadowy faces loomed above him. A rope coiled downward, splashing, "Hullo! You all right?"

Rome grunted, treading water desperately as he whipped loops above him. "Haul away," he croaked.

Swaying, dripping, scraping, he was drawn to the top and hauled over the coping. They propped him in a sitting

position while Julane dabbed at the cut in his scalp, where he had scraped the coping when he fell. The two cowboys stood fiddlefooting. It was all a little fuzzy until they carried him to the house and thawed him out before a hot kitchen stove, pouring down scalding coffee spiked with whiskey. His mind cleared suddenly and he straightened, looking about as he rubbed his swollen jaw. "Feels like I got kicked by a mule," he confessed.

Julane laughed. "He is," she said. "Mule stubborn. When he hit you, he didn't think of the well. You gave him a bad turn, Whitaker."

"I must have. So bad he ran off and left me to drown, eh?"

"Hardly that. Dad ordered us to get you out, tucked a bottle in his saddle pocket and rode out. When he gets mad, he really gets steamed up."

"Where's Cinco gone, Julane?"

"To have it out with Gaynor. If he finds Jared's Wolf LeGore, he'll kill him. If not, he'll come back here, put a gun in your hand and kill you. I hope for your sake Fiddler's dream-talk wasn't too far off."

"You hope." Rome grinned at her. "What do you think I hope? Everything I said was true to my knowledge, with the possible exception of Gaynor being LeGore. And knowing Fiddler like I do, I'll bet on that." He stood up, trying shaky legs. "The reckless fool! Does he think Gaynor would admit who he is? Gaynor's gone too far to let any man stand in his way now. And to think your dad's been putting death into the hands of a monster like that. Whatever possessed him, Julane? Surely, Cinco didn't need money that bad."

The girl came close to him, her face taut with feeling. "I told you dad was stubborn," she said. "I didn't tell you how stubborn, not by half. He's always been outspoken—his own free man. That's the way he was in the church, speaking out

against the things he disbelieved, challenging leaders he believed to be insincere, upsetting the injunction, '*hear ye, and believe*'. When they threw him out of Mormonism, he lived only for retaliation, joining any and all groups committed to the overthrow of Brigham and his hand-picked yes-men. I want you to remember that, when and if you judge those connected with Jared Gaynor."

"More probably," growled Rome, "I'll remember that he swapped you off, like a sack of potatoes, for gain."

"I know." She sighed. "The letter, never delivered, was clumsy. That's Dad's way. What he meant, I'm sure, is that he approved of Jared Gaynor paying me court. He had spoken to Dad, it seems. Actually, he would not have resisted my making my own choice—which I have. Listen, Whitaker, will you take me to Ben, tonight? Now?"

Rome argued against it. The dark trail was no place for a lady. Neither was the untidy bachelor camp in the water pocket. Then too Rome was anxious to head into the Starvation Meadows, where Gaynor drilled his Angels of Hell, where Crossman rode even now to stubbornly demand the truth from one who had long ago abandoned truth.

Julane wept and tears melted Rome. After all, he could not now hope to overtake Crossman. And, in view of the evening's developments, it was really important to consult with Fiddler. So Rome, with Julane at his stirrup, rode down the trail that led to Gunstock Crossing—a trail frequented by desperate men who would kill for a coin, a horse or a gun.

ROME rode with his hand on the gun Julane had returned to him. She too carried a pistol, wearing it like she knew how to use it. They had passed the post marking the south line of the Indian Reservation and were riding through a grove of cottonwoods when loops, flipped

from above, settled about them. The ponies, startled, leaped forward. Rome tried desperately to shuck the rope, might have done so had he been given a split second more time. His horse ran out from under him and there he was, dangling at rope end, his arms pinned to his sides.

"Got 'em!" Horsemen broke from the brush. Julane was screaming angrily at them, fighting, struggling, as they took her from the loop to a place before a rider on the saddle. A match flared, revealing bandana-masked faces.

"Cripes, what luck, men! Five Shot's gal. Carryin' a gun, too."

They came to Rome. He kicked savagely at them until a gun muzzle rapped his knee, crippling him. They felt for his gun, lifted it. A match flared in his eyes. "One of Five Shot's men," said someone. "What'll we do with him?"

"Let him hang there. Do him good. All set? Let's go!"

There was a roar of hoofs. The sounds swelled and dimmed and died away. Night wind swayed the trees and Rome swung dizzily. The rope began to slip up his chest, lowering him a quarter inch at a time as it crept inexorably toward his throat. Now his forearms were free and he could get his fingers under the rope. But he could not hold it. Chancing failure and strangulation, he rolled the binding loop upward, heaved his right arm from under the rope and made a grasp for the strand above his head.

He missed, felt himself falling, gave himself up for doomed. Then he was standing on the ground with the loop just tight enough to cut off his breath. As he cast off the rope, he marveled that he should have forgotten his horse, Blue Boy, at a time when to forget was to die. He emitted a shrill whistle now. A whinny answered him. The horse came swiftly. Rome swung to saddle, spurred to intercept Julane's pony and lead it toward his camp. . . .

Rome heard the ghost-like squeal of Fiddler's violin as he entered the water pocket, sang out, received no answer and called again. The dirge-like fiddling continued, unlike Fiddler's sprightly *Rozin the Bow, Irish Washerwoman* and *Hell among the Yearlin's*. Streams of warning poured along Rome's spine. He dismounted, approached on foot, regretful that he had no gun. "Fiddler!" Cautiously, he shifted position as he called.

From a point overlooking the camp, he saw Fiddler sitting beside the fire, sawing mechanically. Casting caution aside, Rome hurried down. Fiddler watched him approach, his eyes expressionless in the fire-glow. His face was bruised, bloody, smeared, from a split scalp. Mercilessly beaten, he was out, fiddling by instinct alone.

Rome had quite a struggle taking the instrument from Fiddler, laying him out and sponging him off. A drink brought him back to pain and he cursed amazingly while Rome shredded a shirt to bandage the injured scalp.

"I think you'll live, Fiddler. Did our friend Ben do this?"

"Not Ben." Fiddler mumbled between mashed lips. "Wichita . . . an' a dozen riders. Lookin' fer the gold you taken offa him. They give me the business, left me fer dead."

"Wryneck? Ben?"

Fiddler sighed, heavily. "Wryneck run, them shootin' at him. Dunno if he made it. After mullin' over what you told him, Ben 'lowed his only chance to prove himself was to go fer them guns tomorrow night. He's got guts; I'll say that. When Wichita showed, Ben cussed him, slandered his ancestors an' dared him to fight." He took another drink. "Betwixt them two was the hate of two men lovin' the same woman. Wichita hated hardest, havin' lost his gal an' a fist fight to boot. In the augerment, it all comes out about Ben an' this smugglin'. . . ."

He paused, fighting back nausea. "Ben's patrol uncovered the gun runnin'. The Crossman gal begged him to spare her dad. It was love ag'in' oath. Love won. Wichita turned Ben in. Facin' court martial, an' mebbysso a firin' squad. Now Wichita's gonna turn him in for the reward."

"Bad," mused Rome, "but not as bad as if Ben had sold out." He told Fiddler how he and Julane had been roped, the girl taken away. He confessed telling Crossman Jared Gaynor was Wolf LeGore. "Cinco's gone to Starvation to make Gaynor deny it. LeGore and Wichita are partners, manned, armed and ready to attack Zion. Then it will be charged to Yankee patrols, of course. With the Crossman's dead, they'll own the cattle, horses an' grain of Black Bull Ranch. A neat support for their campaign against Brigham. By the way, you've got that dust safe, haven't you? Time we were making use of it, no?"

"Past time, I'd say." Fiddler's finger pointed. "It's buried yonder, behind those rocks. Before you uncover it, look for Wryneck. He should be lyin' there."

Carrying a candle-lantern, Rome searched the brush, fearing what he would find. Finding nothing, he gave up presently and came downhill past jagged rocks rising like giant stalagmites. Fresh-dug earth, like a badger burrow, attracted him. Here in the waste was the print of a man's knees. In the hole was the imprint of the duck panniers that had held Crossman's California gold. The cache had been looted!

CHAPTER FOUR

That Bloody Starvation Trail

RECUPERATING miraculously, Fiddler was up in an hour, cussing those who had beaten him and violated the cache. He mourned Wryneck. "If he was

alive," he wailed, "he'd uh bin back, long since. He's dead, or shot so bad he can't call or crawl. I'm goin' after them buzzards, with payoff in both hands."

Rome thought dismally. Crossman's dust had been earmarked for the San Pitch farmers—Mormons bravely bucking great odds. To a man, they believed in Brigham's "visions". For the glory of Zion, they'd fight rebels, disbelievers or Yankees. They had guns and ammunition, furnished for use against the Yankees when Brigham passed the word.

That these people would rise against the Angels of Hell, Rome had no doubt. But without a thing to offer them save death, he put the idea from his head. Soon enough they would be called by Brigham to take up arms for Zion, and to die. In the meantime. . . .

"If you feel up to it, Fiddler, let's go. Got a gun here I can use?"

"Wryneck's sawed-off buckshot squirter. Rummage in his bed an' you'll find it. Shells there, too."

He stumbled down to the creek and came back astraddle his dun. Rome was already ahorse, the scattergun riding across his lap. Fiddler led the way, a battered warrior looking like some fierce old pirate with the bloody bandage around his head. They rode grimly into the moonrise, up the lonely, winding switchbacks of Starvation Trail. . . .

Five miles up the long grade, Fiddler's horse shied, snorted and swerved from the trail, almost throwing him. A bear-like creature barred the way and Rome tight reined his pony with one hand, lifted his gun with the other. "Don't shoot!" cried Fiddler. "It's a man!"

Rome quit the saddle, sprinted ahead with his gun level before him. A man huddled in the trail, on hands and knees, with his head swaying from side to side. From his throat came hoarse, gagging sounds, "*Agh, agh, agh-h-h.*" A stream of frothy blood poured from his open

mouth. Rome made a light. "Quirk!" he said. "Zack Quirk!"

He made a little fire there beside the trail. Fiddler came up, leading his boogered animal. Zack's eyes were open but it was plain he didn't see them. He was bled white, far gone. "Can you hear me, Zack?" asked Rome. "What happened to you?"

"*Agh, agh, agh-h-h.*"

"I heard that before," said Fiddler, grimly. "Back in Carthage. It's a wonder they didn't think to cut my tongue off, too."

Rome shuddered. That was it. Somebody had cut Zack's tongue out. He was bleeding to death and there was nothing they could do for him. Rome caught him around the shoulders, tried to force a scarf into his mouth. He collapsed in Rome's arms and was dead instantly, wickedness gone from his face that now looked weak and peaceful. "They cut out his tongue," mused Rome. "Something mostly used for traitors who talk."

"Or to stifle gousin', Rome. Remember, Zack believed Wichita had that gold. If Wichita refused him his cut, you better believe Zack waxed almighty nasty."

"It means we better get Ben and the Crossman's fast, Fiddler. Let's go."

"Wait!" Fiddler tensed, listening. "Hawsses comin'! Back to the brush!"

A moment later two horsemen came down the grade, drew rein, staring. "There he is," said one. "He got a heap further'n I thought, lay down with his fire an' died."

"Make sure this time," said his mate. "We left him for dead before an' two minutes was enough for him to escape. If we hadn't found him, we'd have been shot."

"Lousy game," swore the first. "Hell today; bullet in the guts tomorrow. Before I prune another tongue, I'll kill horses quittin' Hell's Angels."

They stepped from their ponies and,

leading them, approached Zack. Rome stepped out, scattergun level. "Steady, boys! Hands high!"

They froze. Guilt sharpened their fear and dulled their hope of mercy. As though by signal, they spun, swinging pistols. "For Zack," clipped Rome, and his buckshot turned one into a bundle of bloody rags. Fiddler shot the other in the throat, breaking his neck, killing him instantly.

"Vamoose!" Fiddler was moving. "The others'll be on us like hornets!"

Rome ran down for the guns and cartridge belts of the dead and, a moment later, he and Fiddler sat their mounts in deep timber, listening to passing riders, their calls and the flash of their guns. "Camp nearby," husked Rome. "And a good time to visit it while they're hunting us. Reckon we can make it?"

"We can make it through hell," grunted Fiddler.

HE LED out through brushy timber, and after an hour, constantly menaced by riders swarming along the trail, they paused on a scarp overlooking Lower Starvation Meadow. Dying fires glowed here and there. On a centrally located drill ground, a flag, whipped at a tall masthead—a white rag with a red flame dancing in its heart.

"Gaynor's headquarters," muttered Rome.

"Accordin' to the messenger I collected, Gaynor's got several camps like this. I didn't ask him which 'un Gaynor stayed at. How about goin' down?"

"Sure!" Tying the ponies back from the rim, he and Fiddler went down the talus. Sentries paced the camp perimeter and, like coyotes, the partners stalked one. He never knew what hit him.

The Angels wore no uniforms, having small appetite and less money for such frills. Their distinguishing badge was a short, white poncho, with the red flame insignia sewn on, front and back. This

Rome appropriated, shouldered the man's gun and, with Fiddler skulking along the brush line behind him, stepped smartly along the beat. An approaching guard sang out. "Thanks for walkin' part of my beat, fella. You can have it all while I snooze, if you insist."

"Might do that," gruffed Rome, "if you'll loan me some 'baccy."

"Keno!" The sentry came up, chuckling, digging for tobacco. He gaped as Rome accepted the sack. "Cripes, you ain't Buck Hammett," he said, recoiling. "How'd you. . . ?" Rome's rifle took him alongside the jaw. He fell like a plummet.

Fiddler glided up. "Nice goin', boy. Now what? Aim to rap, rope an' gag everybody in camp?"

"If necessary." Rome put the sentry's flame insignia on Fiddler. "Now to the drill ground, old timer. Try to look soldierly." Shoulder to shoulder, heads up, boots in step, they marched into the camp, turned into a company street and headed for the flagpole.

They reached the parade ground, where the houses of officers and specialists fronted the square, their lights throwing ragged rectangles of glare from the windows. A man stood in a lighted doorway, facing inward. The muted rumble of his voice came to them and some other man's rejoinders.

"That," muttered Fiddler, "looks like Wichita."

"We can hardly expect such luck," said Rome, "but . . . listen!"

Echoes of hoofbeats rolled through the night, coming toward them along the street they had just traveled. "Lone hawssbacker," said Fiddler.

"Pace a beat like we were on guard," snapped Rome. "You circle right and I'll go left. We'll meet yonderly and if that's Wichita. . . ."

Rifles shouldered, they paced the parade ground margin. The hard-spurring rider slashed between them, crossed the parade

ground. The man in the doorway turned and Rome saw that it was Wichita. The rider made a running dismount, darted past Wichita and was lost inside. Presently Wichita again faced inward, but for only a few moments. Then he spun, leaped from the doorway and sprinted across the parade ground. He crossed Rome's path, not five rods before him, rapped on a door and burst into a house. The door banged behind him.

Rome threw a glance across to where Fiddler was marching down on the house Wichita had just quitted. Fiddler might find trouble there and need help. *I'll have to chance that*, thought Rome. *This is too good an opportunity to lose. It may be my only chance.*

Speeding his steps, he reached the entrance of the house that held Wichita. He heard the man's deep tones. "Two of our guards are dead, lying beside Zack Quirk. That's puzzling, I'll admit, but I think it can be explained by—"

"You have an explanation for everything, Briggs, don't you?" The voice was flat, faintly ironic. "The plain facts are that our enemies haunt the trail, making a mockery of you and your Provincial Guard. Now quit talking and show results. Get those men quickly! Don't come back without them."

A cold voice, an inhumane voice, a deadly voice. Rome knew without having heard it that it belonged to Jared Gaynor—the man who, calling himself Wolf Le-Gore, had long ago pledged himself to destroy the Mormons. This was the man he had dreamed of meeting, face to face, for twelve long years. This was a piece of luck too good to be true. Knowing the risk and scorning it, he opened the door and shoved into the room with a loud banging of boot-heels.

Across the table sat the "Wolf", his eyes lifting to Rome without surprise, without emotion of any kind, staring a blank deadly stare at him.

CHAPTER FIVE

Dead Man's Valor

"I CAN have you shot for walking in here unannounced," said Gaynor, as nervelessly as if he were saying it would rain. "What do you want?"

Graying hair, mustache and vandyke were carefully trimmed. He was dressed in a loose sack coat, fitted for comfort, and tight pants stuffed into shiny Russian leather boots. He looked more like some prosperous merchant than a dealer in blood.

Rome closed the door behind him. "You don't know me, eh Gaynor?"

"Should I?"

"This is Whitaker!" Wichita cried. "One of those three partners in a San Pitch mine. He's the one who likely got Crossman's dust. He's the one I took the girl from, earlier tonight."

Gaynor loosed a wicked laugh. "You let him live, Briggs. Now you're in real trouble." His eyes swiveled to Rome. "Whitaker! Whitaker? Not. . .?"

"John's son, Gaynor. I've hunted you twelve years."

Gaynor's cold green eyes glazed with thought. "One of few, Whitaker. Others were Speakman, and Fullenwider, who'll be cancelled out tonight."

"I've come to kill you, Gaynor. Nothing else matters."

Gaynor smiled, spread his arms and glanced at the pistols on the wall. "You catch me unarmed, Whitaker. Shoot! I won't blame you." His poise was magnificent, his will a steel barrier before Rome. "Don't bluff, my friend. Shoot!"

But Rome couldn't kill in cold blood and Gaynor knew it. Besides, there was Ben and the Crossmans to think about. Their doom was sealed in the echo of Rome's gun. It left Rome shaken, uncertain. It's one thing to plan a killing, another to execute it when the victim

smiles, bares his breast and invites death.

"Not heeled, eh?" Rome sneered. "That's no excuse, Gaynor." He got a gun from the wall. Wichita, unmoving till now, took a backward step and yelled:

"Whitaker! Look out!"

Rome spun. Gaynor was lifting a deringer. His lips were tight and his green eyes burned. Rome swerved as he fired. Flame licked from Gaynor's hand and a bullet seared Rome's neck. He heard the smash of his slug against Gaynor's body, saw blood spurt from his throat. He shuddered, sagged. For an instant his will rallied him, but he could not hold. Weakness pulled him flat on his back.

But again Gaynor's inflexible will took command, driving him. His hand came up, spitting bullets. Rome shot him again, killing him, but not before Wichita took two of Gaynor's bullets and slumped to the floor. Rome breathed again, reloading, watching the handsome young fellow blinking away shock, courageously, without revealing his pain. "You committed suicide when you warned me, Wichita," said Rome. "Why?"

Thin lips smiled. "Hurry," he said, weakly. "Julane's across drill ground. Keys in my pocket . . . guardhouse, guns, ammunition. Angels attack Salt Lake week from today, marching by way of Heber, Coalville. Maybe my word didn't get through. Luck, Whitaker. Horses behind guardhouse. Hurry. Tell Brigham—"

The message for Brigham went unspoken. Rome folded the hands across his breast, took his keys, listened to the boiling tumult of men approaching, and went out the back. Ghosting behind the brush shacks, he came again to the drill ground. The night seemed full of running men, each bawling his own query for information.

Certain he would not be molested in the confusion, Rome pounded across to the building where he'd first spotted Wichita.

It was dark now and a sentry paced there. Rome came running, gun poised. "What's the shooting about?" he cried, excitedly. "What happened?"

"You tell me, younker. You just come from there." It was Fiddler! "Glad it wasn't you gettin' salted, like I feared. Can't figger how to get our friends loose."

"This does it, Fiddler," Rome shook the keys. "Where's the sentry?"

"Sleepin' . . . out back. Reckon I better tie him before he starts squawlin'?"

"Forget him. We'll be gone before he wakes. Get the ponies out back while I open up." He watched Fiddler duck from sight, opened the guardhouse, stepped inside and dropped the bar. He struck a match, lighted a candle in a bottle neck. "You here, Cinco?"

"Hullo!" came the cautious answer. "Who's that?"

"Rome Whitaker. Julane with you?"

"Whit . . . bless my soul! Kitten, wake up! Whitaker's here! How in hell's name, fella. . .?"

"Where's Ben Fullenwider?"

"Here, Rome," a man cried from another cell, beyond a lodgepole partition. "But don't waste time on me. Get Julane out. I'm legironed to the bars, behind a big padlock."

Rome laughed, whipped open the padlock and went at the leg irons. "We go together, Ben."

"I don't see how you got here," marveled Ben. "But there's hundreds of men around here now, way too many to get past again. Our best hope is Zack Quirk. He reported this ugly business to Cap Hampton, to get even with Wichita for robbing him. Or so he said before they took him out to hang, last night. Gaynor's spies are everywhere. Right now he's laying back laughing at your funny little try to beat the game lone hand."

"Laying back, maybe," said Rome, grimly, "but not laughing. He's dead!"

"That shooting! You killed him." A

note of hope rode Ben's voice, dying quickly away. "Wichita's just as black hearted, Rome. He'll play out Gaynor's hand."

"He's dead too, and a real hero. A good Mormon, he was spying on Gaynor for Brigham. He got word out if it went through, a Mormon column's marching here now. Good deeds, Ben, by two men we believed to be skunks. There you are . . . free. Now for Cinco and his girl." He left Ben flexing numbed legs, went to open Crossman's cell. Ben followed.

"Too much play-acting," he chuckled. "I did some myself. My troubles were by order. A deserter, I was to appeal to Zack Quirk for help and gradually work into Gaynor's Angels. Quirk suspected me. I was bushwhacked on the trail. By Wichita, I thought, but maybe by the sneaky Provincial Guards. Cinco, were you maybe play acting, running guns to the Hell's Angels?"

CROSSMAN emerged from the opened cell, grasping Rome's hand. "No, worse luck," he husked. "My trouble was hate of Brigham and his Apostles. I honestly believed Gaynor a great man, doing badly needed reform. Too late, I saw my mistake. I'll take my medicine."

Julane brushed past, pausing before Ben, looking fresh and lovely in spite of everything. Her eyes twinkled. "Were you play-acting with me too, Mister Fullenwider?"

Rome saw flame leap to Ben's eyes, heard him murmur, "That was the most honest thing of my life, darling. I . . . I'm ashamed I botched everything. . . ." She was in his arms, smothering his words with kisses. And again Rome felt the barbs of jealousy.

Fiddler's plaint struck in. "What the hell's hobblin' the parade? The Angels is driftin' back. Hurry!"

Crossman grabbed Rome's arm. "Who's that?"

"My partner, Cinco, with horses. Break it up, you lovebirds." He shoved them before him. Crossman, leading, was in the doorway when the challenge rang out.

"Who's them horsemen takin' out prisoners? You there; give the password!"

Fiddler, his temper always hair-trigger, yelled. "This!" The smash of his gun split the night. Provincial Guards, left behind to cover the rear of the army marching to Salt Lake, responded instantly. Gunfire shook the encampment. Bullets fanned past the guardhouse. A horse screamed, went down. Rome jerked Crossman inside. Fiddler, cursing, firing, left the ponies and backed in, blood streaming from his already bruised face.

Rome dropped the bar, went to the rack for guns and ammunition. He armed each of them, assigned them places. Bullets, striking through barred apertures, drove them to the floor.

Horsemen charged in with a roar. The defenders fired and horses and men fell in a tangle. The attack fell away. Minutes later, fire arrows began to arc toward the guardhouse, aiming at the vulnerable thatch. The Ute Indians pressed into service had small heart for the task, as their many misses showed, but one fire-brand fell upon an adjoining brush structure. The night wind whipped up a blaze. In a moment, the place was wrapped with flames that licked like serpents' tongues at the guardhouse.

"They'll ketch us afire shore," growled Fiddler. "Swaller lead or fry—the prospect ain't no bargain, mates."

The words hadn't cleared his lips when a curl of smoke swirled into the guardhouse. A faint glow spread along the rafters and the crackling overhead was like a promise of doom. Almost at once, the heat grew oppressive. Fiddler coughed.

"Git a rag over yore noses," he ordered, "an' stay close to the floor till it's time to go out."

"Time, hell!" barked Big Cinco Cross-



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ACE-HIGH WESTERN STORIES

man. "What time is better'n right now, before the shooting light gets too good and before we've got our tail feathers singed. I'm for goin' out shooting!"

"I think you're right," said Rome. "I'll lead the way. It's not far from here to the creek, where we can make a stand. Ready?"

"Let'er go," spat Ben Fullenwider. "If I can get Julane clear, I don't care what happens. . . ."

"Whatever happens," said the girl, fiercely, "let it happen to us both." She held a pistol like she yearned to use it. The men each had two, except Rome. He put all of his faith in Wryneck's scattergun.

It was hard to breathe now. The room swam with smoke that drew coughing from them all. The heat was unbearable, and it would be but a matter of moments until the roof was a sheet of flame. Rome moved to the door, unbarred it and heaved it open. "Now!" he flung back and lunged outside, swerving left. Behind him he could hear the heavy tread of Cinco, his savage muttered curses as he looked for targets.

AS ROME emerged, a great yelling went up from the Provincial Guards. Firing swelled to a mighty peak of sound. Rome braced himself as he ran, certain he would feel the ripping, tearing shock of bullets. He hurled himself around the corner, puzzled, gained the rear unharmed. A single lunge then took him behind the shelter of the rock building. Ben was right behind him, half carrying Julane.

"What they shooting at?" yelled Ben, to make himself heard over the din of gunfire. Cinco Crossman, legging around from the other side, bawled out a quick answer.

"Shooting at the sky. Not a bullet coming near us. Listen to the racket."

Rome was at the corner of the building, peering across the drill ground. The fired building was sending flames skyward now, lighting the whipping flag and the buildings beneath it. Beyond, in the shadows, the crimson pencillings of gunbursts streaked the gloom. Over there another building suddenly burst into flame, and another. In a matter of seconds six were flaming furiously, threatening the camp. Rome could see the Angels of Hell scattering, firing as they ran. And behind them a handful of riders, slanted in the saddle, pouring pistol shots to clear the way. Not many, maybe a dozen. Ten times that many were fleeing before their savage charge. And leading them—it couldn't be true but was—Wichita Briggs rode like a mad demon, screaming his wild defiance.

Rome found himself yelling for that intrepid little band of Mormons, out in the open now in a mad all-or-nothing gesture.

It was inhuman, violating all rules of odds. It couldn't succeed, nor did those riders expect it to. But they cut through their foes, swapping three men for many times that number. They pivoted their mounts to head back as a volley swept them, cutting them down like wheat. Rome groaned. Wichita was down again, this time to stay, and all his men were down with him.

A booming voice egged the Provincial Guards back to the guardhouse, to avenge their lost leader. Already men were dodging across the brilliantly lighted drill ground, their bullets *spatting* against the rock walls. Rome was firing, yelling to Ben to take Julane back to the creek. Crossman was firing. Fiddler was firing. Men were falling out there, falling in numbers all out of proportion to the lead the fugitives were throwing. The answer came out of the shadows along the talus. A dark blot of hard riding horsemen, yell-

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ing like Utes, smashed out a steady rolling drum of fire that took a deadly toll of the rebels.

Gaynor's men were in full flight now and behind them came avenging devils led by a man whose head rolled grotesquely without in any way affecting his balance or aim. Wryneck Speakman! Rome and Cinco Crossman were pumping hands, doing a crazy fling. Julane clung to Ben, crying as if her heart would break. Old Fiddler yelled till he had to suck in a breath, swallowed his "chawin'" and got deathly sick, much to his disgust.

"Who are they?" Cinco Crossman kept yelling. "Who are those men, Rome?"

"Pretty close neighbors of yours, Cinco. Farmers from the San Pitch. Feller with the spinning top is Wryneck Speakman, my partner."

"I want the names of those men, Whittaker. Understand? I'll reward every one. They saved my life, my daughter's too. Yes, sir, I'll see that they never need worry for money, long as they live."

Rome's grin held a hint of wonder, as the truth became apparent. "I don't think it will be necessary, Cinco. Unless I'm mistaken, they were paid in advance, Wryneck acting as your agent. Yes, you've already paid them, Cinco."

"Agent? Paid in advance?" Crossman frowned. "I don't understand."

"Your sixty thousand I took from Wichita, Cinco. I guess I never would have done that if I'd known he was only seeing that it didn't fall into the hands of Hell's Angels. Which makes Wichita and Zack Quirk both heroes in my book. Anyhow, I gave that money to Wryneck and I reckon he's already distributed it . . . where it did us the most good in the long run."

The boss of Black Bull Ranch looked like he was getting mad. Then he relaxed and tears came into his eyes. "God bless 'em; they're earning it. I'm proud of you

One Gun Against Hell's Angels

all. And you; if your mine ain't all it might me, you come over to Black Bull. I'll need a manager who knows how to handle men, one to replace that grand guy called Wichita. Think it over and let me know soon's you can."

It was something Rome would do a lot of thinking about in the days to come. But now there was too much excitement for a man to get his mind down so close to earth. Within the hour, Cap Hampton came riding in with a full company of troopers. And, before the night was done and the last of the brush shacks had gone up in the fiery celebration, two platoons and a battery of Brigham's cavalry came riding in with great news. The advance of the Angels on Salt Lake had been shattered, its elements scattered along the foot of the Wasatch Mountains for many miles. And, more important, Brigham Young—guided by vision—had spoken for peace. He would accept a Gentile governor for Utah, some responsible man chosen by the government, and within hours would meet with General Johnston to sign articles of concord.

The rebellion was over. The counter rebellion smashed. Utah had been spared a costly, bloody war with the States. It called for a celebration, the like of which the frontier had never seen, and Cinco Crossman put it on at Black Bull Ranch. General Johnston was there and so was Brigham—that giant whose vision tamed an empire—and his dignitaries. Soldiers, miners and farmers, churchmen, cowboys and Indians—all attended and helped eat the fifty beeves that were barbecued in the big pits.

As part of the celebration, Julane Crossman was married to Ben Fullenwider. Peace reigned, and perfect understanding. Men laughed away old hates and linked arms as they put Utah again on the glory road.

THE END

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(Continued from page 99)

"Driscoll," she said. "Steve, you might give me more credit than that."

"I always gave you all the credit in the world," he said. "I've waited for you, looked everywhere."

"It wouldn't have worked out," she said, "even if I had loved you. You were from a fine family. You had a future when your father died and left you his interests. I wouldn't have fitted. I came from nowhere, was never anything more than a honkytonk singer, Steve." She settled back. "You were going to tell me what brought you on this trip," she nodded at his costume, "dressed like a circus performer."

"This outfit was the idea of the president of our company. The tailors rigged it and I didn't have time to change after I saw it. Colton knew I could handle cards and wanted me to come up and make sure his son wouldn't lose his shirt when he put him on his own with a bundle of currency."

"Did he lose his shirt?" she asked.

Steve Scott nodded. "Everything. And so did Driscoll."

She smiled. "Good. He needs a dressing down. Your hands haven't lost their touch, have they?" She reached and took his hands in hers for a moment, then let them go abruptly.

"They were stiffer than I expected tonight," he said. "I was scared to death he'd catch me on some pass or palm and draw that nasty little derringer he carries and let me have it." He breathed deeply.

"He would have, if he'd caught you," she said.

Steve was studying her. He said, "I'll try once more, Belle. I've got plenty of money, and a good job. I—"

"I've watched you succeeding," she smiled. "No thanks, Steve." She tried to appear relaxed but her body was rigid.

"Anyway, I know where I can find you," he said, rising.

BULLET ANTE

She walked to the door with him. "You'd be wasting your time," she said.

He stepped out on the deck and began walking. Then he knew that someone was following him. He turned and it was Driscoll. He came up behind with the derringer in his hand. "Keep walking," he said. And after a long moment. "So your hands are stiffer than they used to be when you could do anything with cards? So you were afraid I'd catch you?"

"You've been listening," Scott said.

Driscoll gave his head a short nod. "I was. I'm a little late, but I've caught you. And I believe you've got all the money on you, mine and the bearded man's and the kid's. That's handy, and a sizable piece of change for a night's work. The only difficulty is, I'm going to have to kill you."

Driscoll turned his head then, slightly, and Scott acted. He grabbed the wrist and jerked the derringer out of his middle. He struck with his right and then his left. But Driscoll was faster if not as strong. He ducked under the blows and the derringer rose and fell.

Brilliant lights flashed and Steve felt himself going down. He fought to regain his balance, snatching at the rail, pulled himself up and struck again and again.

A girl screamed and Driscoll whirled and shot blindly. Scott was on him as the derringer exploded. He saw Belle Ballard stagger on the deck, falling forward.

Scott spun Driscoll and hit him with all he had. Driscoll's head jerked back and Scott struck again and again with a right for a finish that sent Driscoll slamming back against the iron supports. There was a crunching sound as his head struck the iron but Steve Scott wasn't waiting to see what had happened to Driscoll.

He had Belle Ballard in his arms, saying, "You're hit, darling. Is it bad? Tell me you're all right." He was walking fast, almost running as people began swarming on deck in their night clothes.

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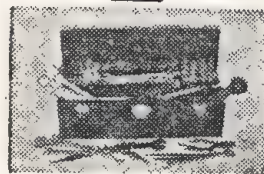
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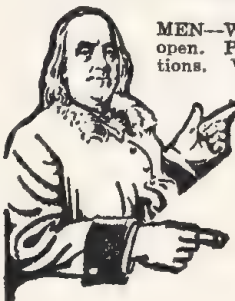
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ACE-HIGH WESTERN STORIES

The wound was in her shoulder, and
bleeding badly. Scott stood at the other
end of the stateroom with the captain and
told him what had happened.

"It's good riddance," the captain said.
His face flushed. "I'd liked to 've had a
part in killing Driscoll myself."

"Killing him? Scott said. "I didn't kill
him.

"You didn't think you did, the captain
said. "I'll grant that. But his head hit the
iron structure work when he fell and it
split his skull wide open."

"Oh, Lord," Scott said. He turned to
the doctor. "How is she," he asked."

"She'll have a hard time for a while,"
the doctor said. "Bad wound in her shoul-
der, but nothing vital."

"When we get back to San Francisco,
I'll see that she gets the best care," Scott
said. He walked over by the bunk and the
captain went out.

The doctor got up and started out.
"You going to watch her till she comes
out?"

Scott nodded. "I'll look after her. If
we need you I'll call."

He said, "You'll be all right, Belle. You
weren't fooling me with that act, trying to
pretend you were drunk. Driscoll let me
know that." He pressed her hand and
watched her lips part and close.

"And," Scott said, "you've got noth-
ing more to worry about from my folks.
There's nobody left but me. We've only
got ourselves to make happy."

She opened her eyes suddenly. "Steve."
"You're going to be fine. Are you in
much pain?"

She shook her head weakly. "Not—
much." Then, "Steve. Did I dream that
you said—only us to make happy?"

"That's right, Belle."

She rolled her head a little closer to him
on the pillow, and he stooped and kissed
her.

PEACE IS A FIGHTING WORD!

(Continued from page 40)

Rowlan's face. He saw the gun in Rowlan's hand slamming blindly at him, and he saw everything break apart in the man's eyes as he raised his own gun, and he heard Rowlan's terror-driven scream as the man spun in a witless attempt to escape, struck the wooden rail, and plunged across it to the street below.

Luke Shane was still beside the buckboard when Dave went down the hotel stairs and across the lobby. He looked at Rowlan's body, and then he raised his eyes and looked across at Luke Shane. He started walking toward the man.

He halted and watched the killer steadily. "All right, Shane. You wanted me. Here I am."

He held his hand close over his gun, looking into the killer's knuckle-bruised face, and waiting. Shane shook his head slowly.

"Not any, Gordon. Not any."

Dave moved his shoulders impatiently, still goaded on by the hot shoving of his anger.

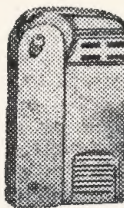
Luke Shane said slowly and definitely, "This was just a job with me, Gordon. Rowlan paid me, and I owed him the job. That's how it was. There's no fun in my kind of work, and I don't do it for free. Rowlan's dead now, and I don't owe him a thing." He shook his head emotionlessly. "I don't want any part of you, Gordon."

He turned then, and walked away. Watching the gunman, a thought scraped the surface of Dave's mind. *He lives by his guns, and one day he'll die by them.*

Dave felt his wife's hand on his arm, and he turned and looked down at her. There was a softness in her eyes that he could never entirely read, and the faintest of smiles was on her mouth.

"The shopping can wait," she said softly. "Let's go home, Dave. Let's go home now."

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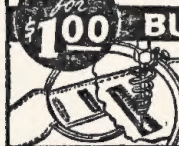
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ACE-HIGH WESTERN STORIES

(Continued from page 64)

where the fall block was anchored. Sam, also, bellowed harsh warning. The Manning men finally seemed to understand.

They started clawing frantically out from under the cable. Sam saw them for an instant. Then a great plume of snow raced up and engulfed them. Sam saw one body flung high. And almost at the same instant, far below, there was a heavy impact. After this came a long, deep silence. The snow spray settled. With loads disarranged but still apparently intact, although the crude skids under the platforms of the first two had been stripped away on the upward rush, the the three sledges of Great California freight lay in the notch of Excelsior Summit, a scant three hundred yards from the boundary of the claim old Tioga King had staked there.

Two bodies, snow-dusted, lay beside the great furrow torn through the snow by the sledges. Three men were crouched unhurt a little to one side of these. Manning was not among them. There was no sign of the remainder of the dozen men Spencer Manning had brought onto the rim. The sledges had apparently plowed through the center of the group. Sam got to his feet and started unsteadily toward the sledges. Bill Bolin fell in beside him.

"My God!" he said softly. "Grayson, you've made history with this!"

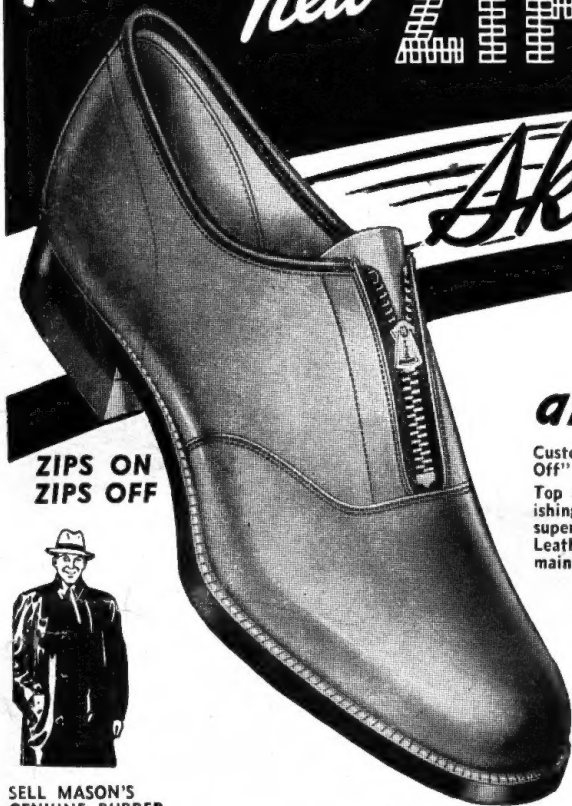
Sam shook his head. "We had a job. We did it the best way we could. Not me. Us—Bennett and Nils and Muley Brown—and you. We just did a job, Bolin."

The man took off his hat and wiped the sweat from his forehead.

"Maybe that's what history is, then," he said. "It's a hell of a long ways down to where we can get a drink. Mind if we get started?"

THE END

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